

Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils 1: Adventures of Youth

Jin Yong

The Demi Gods and Semi Devils

天龍八部

TIAN LONG BA BU

Book 1: Adventures of Youth



Original novel written by Jin Yong
(Louis Cha)

Chapter 1: Adventures in the Mountains

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A flash of green, a dark green sword is thrust out, pointing right at the left shoulder of a middle-aged man. The young man with the sword in his hand didn't wait for the move to grow old before suddenly tilting the sword sideways as the blade swipes towards the right shoulder of the middle-aged man. The middle-aged man holds up his sword to parry. "Zeng"! The two swords meet, each individual sword vibrates, creating a slight hum. The humming did not stop before the flashes began again, another three moves have been exchanged. Suddenly, the middle-aged man's sword sliced straight down, heading towards the young man's forehead. The young man stepped to his right to dodge the blow while leading his opponent's sword on with his left hand, and then the green sword is thrust toward the thighs of the middle-aged man.

Both fighters are quick as a flash, fighting with all of their skills.

On the east side of the atrium there sat two people. One is a Taoist nun of around forty years of age, face as cold as iron, mouth closed shut. The other is an old man a bit over fifty, stroking his beard with his right hand, face full of pride. They are seated about two meters apart, behind each stood about twenty or so male and female disciples. The west side is occupied by about ten guests. Everyone's complete attention is on the two people fighting in the middle of the atrium.

The fight has gone on for about seventy exchanges now, the moves keep on getting faster and tighter, but no winner has emerged yet. Suddenly the middle-aged man thrust his

sword out again with great force, too much force, and he started to teeter as if he was going to fall. A young man wearing green in the west of the atrium couldn't help but let out a little laugh. However, he immediately realized that it was very out of place and quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

Right at this time, the young man in the atrium sends his left palm out, aiming for the back of the middle-aged man. The middle-aged man took a step forward to avoid the strike. He swung his sword in a circle close to the ground and shouted: "Gotcha!" The young man's left leg was hit and his leg gave out. However, he pointed his sword at the ground and used it like a crutch as he balanced himself and seemed ready to continue. The middle-aged man has already sheathed his sword, saying with a smile: "Brother Chu, thanks for letting me win, are you hurt bad?" The young man's face turned white as a sheet, biting his lips, he replied: "Thanks for pulling back, Brother Gong."

The old man with the bearded face is alit with pride. He smiled and said: "The East Faction has won three rounds, looks like the 'Sword Lake Palace' (Jian Hu Gong) is going to belong to the East Faction for another five years. Sister Xing, shall we continue with the match?" The middle-aged nun barely controlled her anger: "Brother Zuo's disciples are worthy of his name. But has Brother Zuo made any progress on the 'No Measure Jade Cliff' (Wu Liang Yu Bi)?" The bearded man shot her a look and said in a serious voice: "Has martial sister forgotten the rules of our sect?" The nun hmphed, but did not reply.

The old man's surname is Zuo, first name ZiMu, he is the head of the No Measure Sword (Wu Liang Jian) sect's East Faction. The nun's surname is Xin, Taoist name is ShuangQing (double clear), is the head of the West Faction.

No Measure Sword sect used to be in factions of East, North, and West. The North Faction in the last decades has weakened much while the East and West has flourished. No

Measure Sword was started in the No Measure Mountains in southern China during the reign of the Fifth Emperor of Tang. The head of the sect resides in the Sword Lake Palace. Ever since the factions started during the rule of the Emperor Ren Zong (Benevolent Ruler) of Song, there has been a contest every five years during which the disciples of the three factions compete in the atrium of Sword Lake Palace. First faction to three wins is declared the winner and wins the rights to reside in the palace for five years. In the five years between contests, the losing factions study and trains hard in hopes of avenging the shame of losing last time. The winner, of course, does not slack off either. The North Faction won forty years ago but was immediately beaten in the next contest five years later. The head of the faction, in a fit of rage, moved his disciples to the west side of the mountain range, never to compete again, as well as losing all contacts with the other two factions. In the thirty five years since, both factions have won and lost with the East winning four times while the West winning twice. That round between that middle-aged man named Gong and the young man named Zu is the fourth round of this year's contest. The win by Gong is the third for the East in four matches, thus making the fifth match unnecessary.

The west side of the atrium sits guests from other sects, including witnesses that are invited by either faction. The rest are just guest who are here to watch a show. Everyone here has at least somewhat a name in the YuNan area with the lone exception being the young man wearing green sitting at the end, who just happened to be the one that let out that solitary laugh.

The young man came with Ma WuDe. Ma WuDe is a big tea merchant in the area. He loves company and gets along with most everyone. If anyone in the world ever came to him for help (mostly financially), he would always do all he can without exception. Hence, he is well like and well respected with many. However, his kungfu is only average. Zuo ZiMu

vaguely remembers the young man being introduced with the surname of Duan. Duan is the surname of the Emperor in DaLi, inside of DaLi borders there are tens of thousands of people with the surname of Duan. Therefore, when the young man was introduced Zuo ZiMu didn't really pay much attention to it, figuring that he probably is a disciple of Ma WuDe's. This Ma WuDe's kungfu is average to begin with, how good can his disciple be? So Zuo didn't even bother with the "Much admired" phrase, just plainly cupped his fist and led them to the atrium. Who knew that this young man is so brazen as to laugh at one of Zuo ZiMu's favorite disciples.

So now, Zuo ZiMu smiles and says: "The four disciples of Sister Xin that fought this year all had very good sword skills. Particularly in that fourth match, our win was especially lucky. Disciple Chu's skill is at such a level at such a young age. Looks like his future is limitless. In five years time, it seems like East and West are going to switch places. Ha Ha Ha." Suddenly he turns his eyes to the young man named Duan: "My lacking disciple used a fake move, "Teetering Step", to win earlier. This young gentleman does not seem to be impressed. Please demonstrate to my disciple how it should be done. Mr. Ma is famous throughout the area, his disciple's kungfu should be very good as well."

Ma WuDe blushed a little from that comment: "This young man is not my disciple. With the little kungfu that I know, how can I possibly be somebody's master? Please don't think too much of it Mr. Zuo. This young man came into my town, heard that I was coming to visit No Measure Mountain, so he asked to come along. He says that he has long heard of the scenic beauty of No Measure Mountain and wanted to see and experience it for himself."

This got Zuo ZiMu thinking: "If he is your disciple, then out of respect to you, I wouldn't go too hard on him. But since he is just a normal guest and visitor, there is no need to be polite. Someone is actually brazen enough to laugh at

No Measure Sword East Faction's kungfu, if I do not make him regret it, then where do I put my face?" So he sneers: "Don't know how we should address you, Mr. Duan, or which famous person is your master."

The young man named Duan smiled a little: "My given name is Yu and I have never learned any kungfu in my life. But if I saw someone fall, doesn't matter if he meant to or not, I couldn't help but to laugh a little." Zuo ZiMu couldn't help but get angrier for he does not have any respect in his tone of voice: "What is so funny about it?" Duan Yu lightly flicked the fan in his hand, casually replied: "A person standing or sitting is not funny, lying in bed, no humor there at all either. Lying on the ground, on the other hand, hehe, is very funny. Unless he's a three year old baby, then we'll make an exception." The more he talked, the less respectful he seemed to become. Zuo ZiMu turns to Ma WuDe: "Mr. Ma, is this Mr. Duan a friend of yours?"

In truth, Ma WuDe just met Duan Yu as well and doesn't know a thing about Duan Yu's background or past. However, he was born friendly and Duan Yu insisted upon coming to No Measure Mountain. Ma WuDe felt awkward to refuse, so he brought him along. At this time, he could tell that Zuo ZiMu's voice is full of anger and won't hold back if he gets started. Duan Yu seems like a nice guy, no point in getting him into trouble. So he says: "Although Mr. Duan and I are casual acquaintances, we still came here together. To me, Mr. Duan seems very gentlemanly and does not know a single bit of kungfu. So his laugh a moment ago must have been just reactionary and he did not mean anything. How about this? I'm kind of hungry right now, so Mr. Zuo, why don't you get some wine and the two of us then toast you three shots each as an apology. Such a good day today, Mr. Zuo, why fuss with someone of a younger generation?"

Zuo ZiMu plainly replied: "Mr. Duan, since you are not a friend of Mr. Ma, then if I, in any way, offend you it doesn't have anything to do Mr. Ma. Guangjie, this gentleman was

just laughing at you, why don't you go and ask for some advice."

Guangjie is the given name of that middle-aged man named Gong; he had been waiting for his master to say something. At once he unsheathed his sword, jumped into the middle of the atrium, flips his sword over, and offered the handle up to Duan Yu: "Mr. Duan, please!" Duan Yu replies: "Very good, go on and practice, I'll watch." He did not move at all from his seat. Gong Guangjie's face turned purple: "You... what did you say?" Duan Yu answers: "You have a sword in your hand and is swinging it here and there, want to practice? Then go ahead and practice. I never liked watching others fight and such, but since I wanted to come here and you aren't really fighting then I guess it wouldn't hurt to watch." Gong Guangjie screamed at him: "My master is telling you to come out here and fight it out with me!"

Duan Yu lightly waved the fan in his hand and shook his head casually: "Your master is YOUR master, your master is not MY master. Your master can command you, but your master can't command me. Your master told you to fight with someone, and you have done so already. Your master told you to fight with me; first of all, I don't know how, second, I'm scared to lose, third, I'm scared it would hurt, fourth, I'm scared I might die; so no fighting. If I say we don't fight, then we don't fight."

This whole speech, full of "your master" and "my master", came out so smoothly that it seemed to be a poem. Numerous people in the atrium could not help but crack up somewhat upon hearing it. No Measure Sword West Faction is divided half male and half female and more than several female disciples start to laugh coquettishly. The serious atmosphere that so engulfed the atrium a moment ago is gone in a flash.

Gong Guangjie walked up to Duan Yu, points the sword at Duan Yu's chest, asked loudly: "You really don't know, or are you pretending?" The sword is merely inches away from

Duan Yu's chest, only a small push is needed for the sword to penetrate his heart. But Duan Yu's face is still calm and shows no signs of fear: "Of course I don't know, why would I pretend?" Gong Guangjie replies: "How dare you cause trouble here in No Measure Mountain, here in Sword Lake Palace? My guess is that you are tired of living. Who is your master? Who told you to come here? If you don't tell me the truth, don't blame me if I don't hold back!"

Duan Yu casually replies: "Hero, why are you being so ferocious? I have never liked fighting with others. Your sect is the No Measure Sword, in the middle of No Measure Mountain. It is said in Buddhist canon: 'There are four things that are of without measure: kindness, sadness, happiness, and sacrifice.' As to what that means, I think everyone knows: happiness leads to kindness; eliminating bitterness leads to sadness; being with friends and leaving bitterness leads to happiness; leaving everything so that worry and affection are equal as one leads to sacrifice. Without measure is of Buddha, amida Buddha. Amida Buddha..."

As he just sits there muttering to himself, Gong Guangjie has pulled back his sword. Suddenly, he threw his arm out and landed a solid slap on Duan Yu's face. Duan Yu tried to tilt his head to avoid the strike, but the slap was too quick. On his white gentlemanly looking face, one can clearly see five red fingerprints.

This caught everyone by surprise. Seeing Duan Yu's casual attitude and all the playing around he does with his talking, everyone assumed that he must be someone with spectacular skills. Who knew he couldn't even dodge a very average slap from Gong Guangjie? Obviously, he does not know any kungfu. In this world, a master pretending to be stupid, jesting with others to amuse himself is very common place. How can someone that does not know kungfu be so brazen and foolish to do so? Even Gong Guangjie stood there dumbfounded for a moment, then immediately he grabbed Duan Yu's chest and lifted him up: "I was wondering

what kind of extraordinary person you are, it turns out you are just a sack of shit!" He threw Duan Yu down, Duan Yu rolled along the floor, finally coming to a stop when his head hit a leg of a table with a loud "Bang".

Ma WuDe did not have the heart to see this, scrambled over and helped Duan Yu up, all the while saying to Duan Yu: "So you really do not know any kungfu, then why cause trouble here?"

Duan Yu answered while rubbing his forehead: "I only came here to visit the mountains and to check out the landscape, who knew they were going to fight? You chop me, I chop you, what's so great about that? A monkey show would be better! Goodbye, Mr. Ma. Goodbye, I'm getting out of here!"

A young disciple of Zuo ZiMu's jumped out right in front of from behind Zuo ZiMu, blocking Duan Yu's exit: "Because you don't know any kungfu, if you leave like this, it really is no bother. But why did you say that our little contest is worse than a monkey show? Seems rather harsh don't you think? I give you two choices: either we spar a little and let you have a taste of this 'worse than monkey' sword skill; or you can go and kowtow eight times to my master, and then say 'Bullshit!' three times." Duan Yu laughed: "You crapped? How come it doesn't stink?"

The young man did not take well to that comment, responding by simply throwing a ferocious punch straight at Duan Yu's face. Just as it looked as if Duan Yu is going to get his face smashed, an object came flying through the air and wrapped around the young man's arm. This object felt cold and slippery to the touch yet somehow firm, as soon as it wrapped around the young man's arm it started to slide. The young man pulled back his arm in shock, looking down he finds out that the object was a snake. The snake is about two feet long and green with red markings. The young man let out a huge scream and started to try to shake the snake off, however the snake seems to be quite comfortable on his arm

and did not want to leave no matter what. Suddenly Gong Guangjie screamed: "Snake! Snake!" Everyone turns in time to see his face filled with fear, his hands were inside of his sleeves, reaching and grabbing for something in his back. But of course he could not reach it, so in panic he started to rip his cloth off.

This drastic change happened so quickly and was so unexpected that nobody has recovered from the initial shock when they suddenly heard a single solitary laugh coming from above their heads. All at once everyone looked up and saw a young girl sitting on a roof beam with snakes in her hand.

She had dimples like flowers. This girl looked to be around sixteen or seventeen, dressed in green. In her hands were ten or so foot long snakes. These snakes vary in colors, but from their triangular heads, it was obvious they were poisonous. But this girl did not seem to mind at all, as if they were toys in her hand. Everyone only glanced at her for a moment, for Gong Guangjie and his martial brother's screaming and yelping made everyone turn their eyes back on to them.

Only Duan Yu kept his eyes on the girl, the girl's feet were swinging back and forth, as if it was lots of fun sitting there on top of the beam. So he asked: "Miss, are you the one that rescued me?" The girl answered: "That bad man hit you, why didn't you hit back?" Duan Yu shook his head: "I don't know how to hit back...."

Suddenly everyone collectively let out an "Ah!" Duan Yu turned to see Zuo Zimu holding a blood stained sword in his hand. A red snake is lying on the ground, in two pieces, obviously killed by him. Gong Guangjie by now is half-naked, but still jumping around like a clown. He is trying to grab a small green snake that is crawling around on his back. A couple of times it looked as if he almost got it, but he never came up with it.

Zuo ZiMu commanded: "Guangjie, stand still and don't move!" Gong Guangjie froze, and then a flash of white, and the snake is on the ground in two pieces. Zuo ZiMu's sword speed was blinding, most of the people present did not see what happened until the snake is on the ground, yet Gong Guangjie's back is left unharmed. Everyone present could not help but cheer.

The girl sitting on the beam shouted down: "Hey! Hey! Old man with the beard, what did you kill my two pet snakes for? If you keep this up I'm going to stop being so courteous."

Zuo ZiMu replied angrily: "Which household did you crawl out of? What are you doing here?" All the while secretly marveling at the girl, this girl who stealthily climbed up onto the beam without anybody noticing! Although everyone's attention was focused on the contest between the factions, but that still should not excuse letting a person climb up onto the beam unnoticed. If a word of this gets out, how much face would No Measure Sword lose? The girl's feet swung back and forth, her shoes are of light green color with a couple of delicate yellow flowers sewn on the sides, and basically dressed as a little girl. Zuo ZiMu continued: "Jump down this instant!"

Suddenly Duan Yu blurted out: "From that high?! She'll get hurt! Go tell some people to bring a ladder!" A couple of people snickered a bit at that comment. The female disciples under the West Faction all thought: "This guy has the look of a well-educated gentleman, but it turns out he's as dense as a piece of wood. The girl got up there without anyone noticing, why would she need a ladder to get down?"

The girl replied: "First you have to compensate for my snakes, then I'll get down to talk to you." Zuo ZiMu answers: "What's the big deal about two little snakes? You can just go and easily catch two more just anywhere." He is not worried about the girl because of her young age. What worries him is that this girl might have someone very powerful, such as her

father or master, backing her up. Therefore, he is actually reasonably polite towards her. The girl grinned and replied: "If it's so easy, why don't you go and catch them for me."

Zuo ZiMu switched the subject: "Jump down." The young girl simply answered "No". Zuo ZiMu threatened: "If you don't come down, then I'm going to have to make you come down." The girl let out a little laugh before answering: "Hehe, come and try then. If you can make me get down, then you are really something." Zuo ZiMu is still a leader of a sect, no matter what he can't be seen actually fighting a little girl. So he turned to ShuangQing: "Sister Xin, could you please send one of your female disciples up there to get her down?"

ShuangQing replied coldly: "We don't have anyone here in the West Faction with that level of Qing Gong (lightness kungfu)." Zuo ZiMu's face dropped one more shade and was just about to answer back when he was interrupted by the young girl: "If you don't compensate me for my snakes, then I'm going to show you a thing or two!" Reaching into her pouch, she took out a furry thing and tossed it at Gong GuangJie.

Gong GuangJie figured this was some weird flying weapon, so he dared not grab it with his hands and just tried to get out of the way. But who would have guessed that this furry little thing was alive? With a twist in midair, it landed squarely on Gong GuangJie's back. It is only now that everyone saw what the thing was, a gray colored marten! {A cute weasel-like creature that can climb trees} This marten was amazingly quick, crawling all over Guang GongJie's back, chest, face, and neck as if it were flat ground. Gong GuangJie tried to grab the little creature, but it was way too fast for him. So he just ended up looking like a clown with a furry ball shooting up and down his body.

Duan Yu couldn't help but laugh: "Truly amazing, now THIS is interesting."

This marten is only about a foot or so long, its eyes are blood red, and it has claws as sharp as razors. Very soon, Gong Guangjie's upper body is covered with countless streaks of scratch marks.

The young girl hissed a couple of times, a white shadow flew right at Gong Guangjie's face. Suddenly the marten has pounced onto Gong Guangjie's face and stopped there, its furry tail swiping back and forth across his eyes. Gong Guangjie immediately tried to grab the marten. But by the time his hands got there the marten was already behind his neck and Gong Guangjie almost dug his own eyes out.

Zuo Zimu stepped up and his sword came flying in. At this time the marten has ended up on Gong Guangjie's face once again, Zuo Zimu aimed his sword at the marten, but the marten has already scrambled to the back of Gong Guangjie's neck. Zuo Zimu's sword stopped just in time so that it is just touching the eyelid of Gong Guangjie. Although he missed the marten, the people present gasped in admiration. For if the sword had gone just a bit further, Gong Guangjie's eye would have been gone. Shuangqing thought to herself: "Brother Zuo's sword skill is indeed extraordinary, even I can't match him. Just this 'Plundered Crossing of the Golden Needle' (Jin Zhen Du Jie) is proof enough of that."

Swish! Swoosh! Zuo Zimu linked together four more moves one after another, but although his moves were fast to a rare degree, the marten is still one step faster. That young girl shouted down: "Old man with the beard, your sword skills are actually pretty good." She then hissed a couple of more times, the marten suddenly scurried downwards and disappeared. Zuo Zimu was taken aback for a moment. Gong Guangjie suddenly start grabbing and scratching his legs, it turns out the marten has gotten into his trousers.

By this time Duan Yu has almost doubled over in laughter, clapping his hand, he commented: "Now this is a

real eye-opener, this trip was worth it after all."

Gong Guangjie literally ripped his trousers off, revealing a pair of hairy legs. The young girl shouted: "Like to bully other people don't you? Well let's see how you like it if you are stripped naked!" Then she hissed twice more. This marten turned out to be quite obedient as it immediately crawled into Gong Guangjie's underwear. With all the girls present in the atrium, there is no way Gong Guangjie is going to take off his underwear. So all he could do was hop around for a bit and smacking his butt and thighs with his hands. Suddenly he let out a scream and start desperately, albeit very awkwardly, making his way out of the atrium as fast as he could.

Just as he is about to exit through the door, someone suddenly popped in from outside. Bang! Both of them were in a hurry and they ran right into one another. Gong Guangjie was knocked a step back, but the person that was entering the atrium fell back and landed in his back.

Zuo ZiMu cried out involuntarily: "Brother Rong?!"

Now, Gong Guangjie had to ignore the marten that's moving all around his pants as he reached down to try and help the person up. Suddenly the marten moved onto a particularly sensitive spot, forcing Gong Guangjie to shriek and grab for the marten, thus making the man fall down again.

The young girl let out a rather coquettish laugh: "Alright, I think you have had enough." She let out a rather long hiss. That marten suddenly appeared from Gong Guangjie's underwear, crawled up the walls, jumped on the beam, and returned to the young girl's lap. The young girl grabbed a snake by its tail and dangled it in front of the marten: "Good boy, here's your reward." The marten grabbed the snake and devoured it. Turns out that the snakes were food for the marten.

Duan Yu was simply amazed by all of this, he has never even heard of anything remotely close to this. The marten

finished eating the snake and crawled back into the young girl's pouch.

Gong Guangjie helped that man up again, asked in surprise: "Martial Uncle Rong, you... you alright? What's the matter?" Zuo Zimu ran up to his martial brother. Rong Ziju's eyes are wide open in a stare and his face is one of indignation and hate; however, he is not breathing. Zuo Zimu is shocked tremendously, he immediately tried to rescue his martial brother by giving him some of his own inner force. But he was not able to do anything. Zuo Zimu knows that although Rong Ziju's kungfu is not as strong as his own, it is still much stronger than Gong Guangjie. The fact that not only was he not able to avoid Gong Guangjie, but was killed by it, means that he must have already been gravely injured. So he immediately opened up Rong Ziju's shirt, exposing his chest. On his chest, written in big black letters, were the words: "Divine Farmer Clan here to exterminate No Measure Sword" (Shen Yi Bang Zhu Mie Wu Liang Jian). More than just several persons screamed involuntarily.

The nine words {Note: it is actually eight characters in Chinese} were not written by ink, nor is it carved out using a sharp object. A poison that caused the flesh to rot was applied in the patterns of the words on Rong Ziju's chest, the rotten flesh sank into his chest and formed the words.

How can Zuo Zimu not be furious? He gave the sword in his hand a shake, making it hum, and shouted: "Well let's see if it is Divine Farmer destroying No Measure or No Measure eliminating Divine Farmer? If this murder is not avenged, how can I call myself a man?" He turns around and inspects Rong Ziju's body; but other than the words, he shows no sign of injury. He commands: "Guanghao, Guangjie, go check outside."

Gan Guanghao and Gong Guangjie are two of his proudest disciples, they pulled out their sword and ran outside.

By now the atrium is in a mess, everyone gathered around Rong Ziju's body discussing and analyzing the situation, completely ignoring Duan Yu and the girl on the beam. Ma WuDe commented: "Divine Farmer Clan's behavior is just getting worse and worse. Brother Zuo, how did you become enemies with them?" { Note: Ma WuDe is addressing Zuo ZiMu as a brother out of friendship, not actual martial or real brotherhood}

Zuo ZiMu thought about his martial brother's tragic and terrible death, swallowed hard, and answered: "For some herbs. Autumn of last year, four lodge heads of Divine Farmer Clan came to visit, asking access to the back mountains in our control to collect some herbs. Collecting herbs is really no big deal. Divine Farmer Clan originally started collecting and selling herbs, and there is no grudge whatsoever between us two clans. But Mr. Ma, you know very well that our back mountains are forbidden to outsiders. Not even the best of friends is allowed to go there, not to mention a clan that we never had any contact with like Divine Farmer. This is the rule ever since the start of our sect, we dare not disobey it. Actually, it really isn't anything serious...."

The young girl on the beam put the snakes in her hand into a little bamboo basket she has tied around her waist. She took out some melon seeds and started eating them, her two feet are still swinging back and forth. Suddenly, she took a melon seed and threw it at Duan Yu, hitting him right on the forehead. Laughing, she asked: "Want some melon seeds? Come on up!"

Duan Yu answered: "I can't without any ladders." The young girl replied: "Well that's no problem." She untied a green silk ribbon from her waist and dangled it down: "Grab a hold of the belt and I'll pull you up." Duan Yu answered: "I'm heavy, you can't lift me." The young girl giggled and replied: "Oh give it a try, won't kill ya." Duan Yu grabbed on to the ribbon that is by now right in front of him. The young

girl cautioned: "Hold on tight." She lightly lifted her hand and Duan Yu's feet are off the floor. Hand over hand, the young girl easily lifted Duan Yu up onto the beam.

Duan Yu said: "Such an interesting marten you got, so obedient as well." The young girl took out the marten from her pouch, holding it up to Duan Yu. The marten's furs were shiny and its red eyes stared at Duan Yu in wonder, just as cute as can be. Duan Yu asked: "Can I touch it?" The young girl answered: "Go right ahead." Duan Yu started to stroke the back of the marten, feeling the smoothness and warmth of the marten.

Suddenly the marten hissed and jumped back into the young girl's pouch. Catching Duan Yu completely by surprise, he lost his balance and almost fell off. The young girl grabbed his collar and pulled him in right next to her. With a smile she said: "You really don't know any kungfu, how strange." Duan Yu asked: "What's so strange about it?" The girl answered: "Well you don't know any kungfu, and you came here all by yourself, then you are bound to be bullied by these bad people. Why did you come here?"

Duan Yu was just about to answer when footsteps interrupted him. Gan GuangHao and Gong GuangJie just came rushing back into the atrium.

By now, Gong GuangJie has put on another pair of pants, although he still hasn't put a shirt back on yet. Both of them have a look of panic on their faces. Walking up to Zuo ZiMu, Gan GuangHao reported: "Master, Divine Farmer Clan is gathered on the mountain top facing ours. They have blocked every path and said that no one is allowed to pass. We saw that the enemies are here en masse, without specific orders from our master, we did not dare to start fighting." Zuo ZiMu nodded: "Mm, how many of them were there?" Gan GuangHao replied: "Around seventy or eighty." Zuo ZiMu let out a little sneer: "Seventy or eighty, and they want to exterminate No Measure Sword? I'm afraid it might not be that easy."

Gong Guangjie held up a letter: "They have shot this arrow up with this letter attached to it."

Zuo Zimu glanced at it, seeing that the envelope read: "Written To: Zuo Zimu." He did not feel like touching the letter, so he commanded: "Open it up and see what it says." Gong Guangjie opened the seal and took out the letter.

The young girl leaned over and whispered in Duan Yu's ear: "That bad man that hit you is about to die." Duan Yu was quite taken aback: "Really?" The girl whispered: "There is poison on the seal and the letter." Duan Yu still can't quite believe it: "You sure?"

Gong Guangjie started to read: "Divine Farmer Clan writing to Zuo.... the person reading this letter (he dared not to speak his master's name out loud, so he stopped once he read "Zuo"). We give you two hours of time to cut off your own right hand, destroy all your swords and weapons, and give up the Sword Lake Palace. Or else not a dog of No Measure Sword would live."

No Measure Sword West Faction's leader Shuangqing snickered: "Who the hell do Divine Farm Clan think they are? Talking shit like that!"

Suddenly Gong Guangjie fell straight backwards. Gan Guanghao, who was standing beside him, automatically reacted by reaching down in trying to help him get up. Zuo Zimu took two quick steps forward, placed a palm on his chest and lightly exerted some inner force, which shook Gan Guanghao back two steps. Zuo Zimu shouted in the midst of the move: "Might be poison, don't touch him!" Looking down, Gong Guangjie's face twitched non-stop, the hand that was holding the letter has already turned pitch black. His feet twitched a couple of times and then all movement stopped.

In such a short amount of time, No Measure Sword has lost two top fighters. Everyone present is struck dumb with shock and astonishment.

Duan Yu leans over and whispers: "Are you in Divine Farmer Clan?" The young girl angrily rebuked: "Pei! Of course not, why are you talking nonsense?" Duan Yu asked: "Then how did you know that there was poison on the letter?" The girl laughed and replied: "This kind of poison is kid's play, you can spot it a mile away. The only people that they can get are the clueless ones." Everyone in the atrium heard her last comment and all looked up. She is still sitting there eating the melon seeds, her feet still swinging back and forth.

Zuo ZiMu turns and inspected the letter in Gong Guangjie's hand, he could not see anything out of the norm. He tilts his head and looked even closer, finally he see that both the seal and the letter has faint traces of phosphorescence. His heart went cold all of a sudden, turning around, he addressed the girl: "May we have the honor of knowing your name?" The girl replied: "My name? Can't tell you. This is a secret of the highest degree, strictly on a 'need to know' basis." Zuo ZiMu suppressed his anger and indignation with great effort, asked again: "Then who is your father? Which hero is your master?" The girl answered with a smile: "Hehe, I'm not falling for that. If I tell you who my dad is, then you would know my surname, and then could check up on who I am. My master is my mom. My mom's name is even more top secret than mine, can't tell ya."

From her dialect, Zuo ZiMu can tell she's definitely from inside of Yu Nan province, maybe even local. Thinking to himself: "In the martial world in Yu Nan, which pair of husband and wife that's good at Qing Gong could be her parent?" The girl hasn't fought yet, so he can't make a call based on her techniques, so he turns to her again: "Miss, please come down so we can discuss this together. Divine Farmer Clan isn't letting anyone through, probably will kill you too."

The girl laughed and responded: "They won't kill me, Divine Farmer Clan will only kill No Measure Sword's people. I heard the news out there, so I came here in hopes of catching a good show. Old man with a beard, your sword skills are not bad, but you don't know anything about poison, you can't beat Divine Farmer Clan."

Her last sentence hit the nail on the head. If only real kungfu is used, the two factions of No Measure Sword and the eight or so guests here in the atrium might be able to take on Divine Farmer Clan. But nobody here understands a thing about poison, so the whole situation changes when poison is thrown in the equation.

The girl's tone of voice seems to show that she is really looking forward to this, as if more of No Measure Sword dies the happier she'll be. Zuo ZiMu could not help but sneer, asked: "What did miss hear out there?" He is used to giving orders and being insufferably arrogant, so he asked this question as if the young girl better answer with the greatest humility.

The girl suddenly asked out of nowhere: "Want some melon seeds?"

Zuo ZiMu's face turned a slight purple, if it wasn't because the enemies are at the gates, he would have snapped a long time ago. So he restrained himself with the greatest of effort and answered: "No!"

Naturally, Duan Yu cut in: "What kind of melon seeds are you eating? Laurel? Rose? Pine?" The girl replied: "Woah! What's the big deal about melon seeds? Why have so many different kinds? I don't know about all those kinds of melon seeds, but these are made my mom. She made them by frying gall bladders of snakes. Eating them improves your eyesight, want to give it a try?" She gave a handful to Duan Yu and continued: "People who aren't used to them think they are somewhat bitter, but actually they taste really good." Duan Yu didn't want to go against her wishes, so he put one in his mouth. It is somewhat bitter, but there is a bit

of spiciness to it with very sweet after-taste. Afterwards the back of his tongue feels clean and refreshed, so he picked up another one and put it in his mouth. He put all of the shells on the beam besides him, but the girl didn't seem to care and just casually spits them out. The random falling shells has caused quite a few people below to get annoyed and move further away.

Zuo ZiMu asked again: "Miss, what did you hear out there? If you can tell us, I... I will be forever grateful." Because he is the one in need, he tried to sound as polite as he can. The young girl asked in return: "The Divine Farmer Clan people talked about some 'No Measure Jade Cliff', what in the world is that?" Zuo ZiMu was taken aback for a moment, quickly recovered and replied: "'No Measure Jade Cliff'? Do we have some precious jade or jade stone? Never heard of it before, Sister Xin, have you heard of this before?" Before ShuangQing could respond, the young girl cut in: "Of course she never heard of it before. Stop playing around as if I'm a kid, if you don't want to say it, then don't. Hmph! Not like I really care!"

A bit awkwardly, Zuo ZiMu continued: "Oh yeah, I think I know. Divine Farmer Clan was probably talking about this smooth cliff face of the White Dragon Peak in our No Measure Mountain. This rock is very smooth like a mirror, you can even make out individual hairs in the reflection. Some people say it is a big piece of jade, but in reality, it's really nothing more than a really smooth and really clean piece of rock."

The young girl replied: "Well if that's all why didn't you say it earlier? Then how did you and Divine Farmer Clan become enemies? Why would they not even allow a dog of No Measure Sword live?"

Zuo ZiMu sees that he can't get anything out of the girl without first letting his secrets out. Because the urgentness of the situation and with all the outsiders present, he can't very well grab the girl and force her to tell can he? He

suggested: "Miss, please come down so I can tell you everything." The girl's feet continued to swing back and forth again: "If you are going to tell, what difference does it make if I come down? And I don't believe more than half of what you say anyways. So go right ahead."

Rage flashed on Zuo ZiMu's face, but he quickly recovered and began: "Last year Divine Farmer Clan came to ask for access to our back mountains to collect some herbs and I refused. So they snuck in and ran into Brother Rong and a couple of disciples, who scolded the perpetrators for trespassing. They replied: "What is this place? The Imperial Gardens? Why can't we come here? Did No Measure Sword buy up all of No Measure Mountain?" Words were exchanged and the conversation became very heated until they finally started fighting. Brother Rong did not hold anything back and killed two of them. That's how it all started. Then on the banks of the LanCang River we two sides got together again, a couple more of lives were lost there." The young nodded: "Oh, so that's it? What kind of herbs were they looking for?" Zuo ZiMu replied: "I'm not quite sure which kind."

The young girl triumphantly replied: "Figured you wouldn't know. Since you have told me how all this got started, I should probably tell two things. That day I was out catching snakes for my marten Lightning..." Duan Yu cuts it: "Your marten's name is Lightning?" The young girl answered: "Yeah, of course. When he gets going, isn't he quick as lightning?" Duan Yu nodded in agreement: "That's right! Lightning... such a good name!" Zuo ZiMu glared at Duan Yu for interrupting, but the girl is just getting to the important part and might get mad if he goes after Duan Yu, so he kept his mouth shut.

The young girl continued to talk to Duan Yu: "Lightning loves to eat poisonous snakes, he doesn't eat anything else really. I had him since he was born, he's four now. He only listens to me and nobody else, not even my parents. If I want him to frighten people then he would, if I tell him to bite he

goes and do it. Such a good boy!" She reaches into her pouch with her left hand, petting the marten.

Duan Yu isn't a complete fool: "Mr. Zuo is just as anxious as can be. Why don't you tell him what he wants to know."

The girl let out a little laugh, looked down at Zuo ZiMu, and continued: "So there I was hiding in the bushes searching for snakes, when a couple of men came walking by. One of them said: 'This time, if we don't kill all of No Measure Sword, take over No Measure Mountain and the Sword Lake Palace, all of our heads will be taking a nice little trip.' I heard that there will be some fighting, figured it would be pretty interesting, so I kept on listening. They just stayed there chatting, saying something about orders from the Nimble Vulture Palace of Misty Peak to take over Sword Lake Palace and check up on 'No Measure Jade Cliff'."

As she said this, Zuo ZiMu and ShuangQing shot a look at one another at the same time.

The girl asked: "What exactly is Nimble Vulture Palace of Misty Peak? Why does Divine Farmer Clan listen to its command?" Zuo ZiMu replied: "This is the first time we have heard of the Nimble Vulture Palace of Misty Peak. We had no idea that Divine Farmer Clan was actually obeying orders when they were stirring up troubles with us." Thinking that the Divine Farmer Clan would obey them, then that Misty Peak-whatever must be quite formidable. Of all the mountains and peaks in Yu Nan, Zuo ZiMu has never heard of one called Misty Peak. The more he thought about all of this the more worried he got.

The girl ate two more melon seeds before continuing: "So then one guy said: 'If the herb Heaven's Link of No Measure Mountain can cure the illness of our clan leader then we would gladly take on whatever hardships that may come our way to get our hands on it.' Another guy sighed: "Only the Kid Elder of Heaven Mountain (Tian Shan Tong Lao) herself can cure this Life-Death Insignia that is in me. Heaven's Link may have amazing healing powers, but I'm just hoping that

it would ease some of the pain when this Life-Death Insignia breaks out, it really is worse than death itself when....' They walked away and I can't hear them anymore. Am I clear enough on what happened?"

Zuo ZiMu was deep in thought and did not answer. ShuangQing suggested: "Brother Zuo, Heaven's Link is nothing special. If Si KongXuan (head of Divine Farmer Clan) want some to numb the pain, then why don't you give him some and all would be solved?" Zuo ZiMu snapped back: "Like it would make a difference if we give them some Heaven's Link? Didn't you hear? They are after No Measure Mountain and the Sword Lake Palace!" ShuangQing hmphed at him again, but did not reply.

The girl put her right arm under Duan Yu's armpits and said: "Going down?" Before Duan Yu could answer she's already leapt off of the beam. Duan Yu just managed to let a little yelp out before he was in midair as well. The girl gently landed on the floor with Duan Yu, her left arm still around his right arm. She suggested: "Wonder what Divine Farmer Clan looks like? Let's go outside and have a look."

Zuo ZiMu jumped forth: "Hold on, I still have a couple of question I want to ask. You said that when the Life-Death Insignia on Si KongXuan breaks out, it is worse than death itself. What is Life-Death Insignia? And who is the Kid Elder of Heaven Mountain?"

The young girl replied: "First of all, I don't know the answers to your questions. Second of all, with an attitude like that, even if I knew the answers I wouldn't tell ya."

At a crucial time like this, Zuo ZiMu really don't want to make more enemies. But with the existence of No Measure Sword in jeopardy here, he can't afford not to get to the bottom of all this. So he jumped in front of Duan Yu and the girl and said: "Miss, Divine Farmer Clan is right outside, if you go out and something unfortunate happens to you then my conscience will not let me live in peace." The girl answered with a smile: "Why would you care since you

didn't really invite me here? Besides, you don't even know my name, if Divine Farmer Clan kills me my parents can't really blame it on you." All the while she's tugging on Duan Yu's arm and walking towards the door.

Zuo ZiMu unsheathed the sword from his waist: "Miss, please stay." The girl asked: "Using force now?" Zuo ZiMu replied: "I just want to get some clear answers regarding the questions I asked earlier." The girl replied: "And if I don't tell you? Are you going to kill me?" Zuo ZiMu replied: "Well you have left me with no choice." He brought his sword up to chest level, blocking the exit of the two.

The girl turned to Duan Yu: "This old man wants to kill me, what do you think we should do?" Duan Yu flicked the fan in his hand, then answered: "Well, we should do whatever you think we should do." The girl asked: "If he just stabs me and kills me, then what?" Duan Yu replied: "'Share the blessings, share the hardships.' Melon seeds we ate together, sword blades we take on together." The young girl replied: "Now there's a couple of good sentences. You are turning out to be quite a friend, I guess us meeting is not in vain after all. Let's go." She started to walk toward the door, as if the sinisterly green sword in Zuo ZiMu's hand is not there.

The sword in Zuo ZiMu's hand moved toward the left shoulder of the girl. He had no intentions of harming her really, just wanted to stop her from leaving.

The young girl tapped the pouch around her waist and hissed. Suddenly a white flash leapt out of the bag onto Zuo ZiMu's right arm. Zuo ZiMu immediately tried to snatch it off with his hand. But the marten was just too quick for him; before he knew it, the marten has already bitten his wrist and jumped back into the girl's pouch.

Zuo ZiMu let out a loud cry and let his sword drop to the floor. Feeling his right wrist go numb, he screamed: "Poison, poison! You... The little bastard marten has poison!" His left

hand grabbing just above his right wrist, trying desperately to prevent the poison from spreading upwards.

The disciples of No Measure Sword East Faction scrambled up, three of them went to support their master, the rest of them all drew their swords and surrounded Duan Yu and the girl. Pointing their swords at the two of them, someone threatened: "Quickly hand over the cure, or else this girl will die a most horrible death."

The girl laughed: "I don't have any cure. But you guys just need to get some Heaven's Link, fry it in some thick oil, then feed him a bowl and he should be alright. But within the next six hours, he is not allowed to move much, or else the poison goes straight to the heart, and that's not good. What the hell do you guys think you are doing blocking my way? Want to give my marten a try?" As she said this she reached into her pouch and took out her marten. Holding the marten up in her right hand, she started to walk out with her left arm still around Duan Yu's arm.

The disciples have all seen the sorry plight that their master is in, they know that with what little kungfu they have, there is no way they can avoid being bitten by the marten, much less catching it. So they all just stood there and watched the two of them walk out of the atrium.

All the guests that were invited saw the speed of the marten as well. Nobody walked out and tried to stop them.

The girl walked out shoulder to shoulder with Duan Yu. The disciples of No Measure Sword are either inside the atrium or just outside guarding against possible attacks. The two of them did not run into a single person since walking out of Sword Lake Palace.

The girl said quietly: "Lightning has eaten upwards of thousands of poisonous snakes in his life, so his teeth are extremely poisonous. That old man that just got bit should have immediately chopped his arm off, if he waits just a couple of hours more, he would die within eight days." Duan Yu turned to her and asked: "But you said all he needed to

do was drink a big bowl of soup made from Heaven's Link?" The girl let out a little laugh and answered: "I was just messing with them. If I don't, would they have let us out?" Duan Yu was quite taken aback by this: "Wait here for me for a moment while I go back and tell him." The girl pulled him back: "Dummy, if you go back and tell them, do you think they would let us live? Lightning is really something, but he and I can't hold them off if they all come at us. You said it yourself: 'Melon seeds we ate together, sword blades we take on together.' I can't just ran away by myself and leave you here to die."

Duan Yu scratched his head: "Then why don't you just give him some cure?" The young girl replied: "Ay! What's with all the fuss? They hit you and you are still this nice to them?" Duan Yu raised his hand and felt his cheek, he replied: "It was only one slap, and it stopped hurting a long time ago, so what's the point in remembering it? Pity the person that hit me died, Mencius read: 'A compassionate heart is the epitome of humanity.' Buddha taught: Save one human life is better than the seventh level of enlightenment.' Although Mr. Zuo was very malicious, he was still very polite towards you."

That young girl let out a cute little laugh before replying: "At that time I had something that he wanted, of course he is going to be polite to me. I know you are talking for him so I can give him the cure, but I really don't have it. Only my dad has the cure. Besides, soon there won't be a dog left of No Measure Sword after Divine Farmer Clan gets through with them. By the time I get the cure from my dad and return, that Zuo ZiMu's head won't be attached to his neck anymore. At that point, I'm afraid it won't make much of a difference whether or not he is poisoned."

Duan Yu shook his head a bit, but decided to stop talking about the cure. The moon has just risen; under the moonlight, Duan Yu notices that the young girl's face, which is white with faint signs of red, is even more tender and

enchanting. He had to ask: "You couldn't tell your name to that old man with a beard, but can you tell me?" The young girl smiled and answered: "My surname is Zhong, my mom and dad call me simply 'Ling-Er" , so you can call me that too if you want to. Let's go sit down over there on the hillside. So tell me, why in the world you came to No Measure Mountain."

The two of them walked side by side toward the hillside to the northwest. Duan Yu started to talk as they walked: "I ran away from home, wandered all over the place. By the time I arrived in Pu Er I have ran out of money. I heard from people there that a Mr. Ma WuDe is very good to guests and visitors, so I went to visit him to get a couple of free meals. Just so happens he was about to leave to come to No Measure Mountain. I heard many times of No Measure Mountain's beauty and serenity. So I decided to follow him here to check it out." Zhong Ling nodded her head and asked: "So why did you run away from home?" Duan Yu replied: "My dad wanted to teach me kungfu, I didn't want to learn. So he started to force me, so I had no choice but to run away."

Zhong Ling stared at him in disbelief, sizing him up over and again. Still not quite believing him, she asked: "Why don't you want to learn kungfu? Don't want to put in the hard work?" Duan Yu replied: "I don't care about putting in the hard work. It just doesn't make any sense in my head to learn it. So I disobeyed my dad, so my dad got mad and got in an argument again with my mom...." Zhong Ling smiled: "Your mom is always taking your side and argues with your dad, right?" Duan Yu answered: "Of course!" Zhong Ling sighed: "My mom is the same." She stared toward the west spellbound, as if looking at something very far away. After a long while, she asked: "Why doesn't it make sense to you?"

Duan Yu replied: "I have been studying Buddhism since I was a kid. Dad even hired a teacher to come and teach me The Four Books and the Five Classics, as well as poetry,

lyrics, songs, and prose. He also invited a very wise monk to come and teach me Buddhist scriptures. For the last ten years, I have been taught that a follower of Confucianism should have a merciful heart, pushing himself to help others. In addition, a disciple of Buddha must not kill nor rage but should be merciful and benevolent in mind and action. Suddenly my dad wanted me to learn kungfu, to learn how to beat and kill people. Naturally, I felt it was wrong and didn't listen. My dad and I debated and argued about this for three days and I still won't listen. He had many of scripture quotes remembered wrong, and some of his interpretations were off too." { Note: The Four Books are The Great Doctrine, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects of Confucious, and Mencius. The Five Classics are The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites, and The Spring and Autumn Annals.}

Zhong Ling added: "So your dad got really angry and beat you, right?"

Duan Yu shook his head: "My dad didn't hit me at all. He just merely hit two pressure points on my body and in an instant it felt like there were thousands and thousands of ants and mosquitoes biting down on me. My dad said: 'How does it feel? I am your dad, so I'll stop this after a bit, but what if I was your enemy, then you are in for a fate worse than death. Just try and see if you can kill yourself.' At that time, I can't even lift a finger, how was I supposed to commit suicide? Besides, I'm doing pretty good living, why would I want to kill myself? Afterwards my mom came and started to argue with my dad and my dad released my pressure points. The next day I ran away."

Zhong Ling listened to all of this in disbelieve, suddenly she said rather loudly: "Your dad knows how to hit pressure points, not only that but it's also one of the top kungfus in the world! Did he just stabbed somewhere on your body with one finger and then you couldn't move and felt numb and itchy all over?" Duan Yu answered: "Yeah, what's so strange

about that?" Zhong Ling's face is just full of shock and disbelief: "You asked me what's so strange about that? You actually asked me what's so strange about that?! People would be willing to kowtow to your dad ten thousand times and beg for ten or twenty years just to learn a fraction of your dad's pressure point hitting kungfu. Yet you actually don't want to learn it, of course it is strange!"

Duan Yu replied: "I really don't see what's the big deal about this pressure point hitting kungfu." Zhong Ling sighed: "You must not say that. And you must not let others know about this!" Duan Yu asked: "Why?"

Zhong Ling answered: "You don't know any kungfu and don't understand anything about the martial world either do you? Your family's pressure point hitting kungfu has no match in this world, it's called 'One Yang Zhi'. Other people in this world, when they hear the phrase 'One Yang Zhi', they almost drool in envy. If people knew your dad knows this, some of them probably would kidnap you and force your dad to exchange the manual for 'One Yang Zhi' as ransom. Then what?"

Duan Yu scratched his head: "Didn't even think about that. My dad will probably get really mad and go fight it out with them." Zhong Ling said: "Right, most people wouldn't dare to go fight against your family. But for the secrets of 'One Yang Zhi', you never know. Besides, you are in their hands so that really makes the situation very difficult. Tell you what, don't even tell people that your surname is Duan."

Duan Yu replied: "There are tens of thousands of people with the surname of Duan in DaLi, I don't think every single one of them knows this kungfu. Besides, if my surname is not Duan, then what is it?" Zhong Ling smiled: "Why don't you just momentarily use mine?" Duan Yu smiled back: "That works, but you are going to have to call me 'big brother' now. How old are you?" Zhong Ling answered: "Sixteen! How about you?" Duan Yu replied: "I'm three years older than you."

Zhong Ling plucked a piece of grass from the ground and slowly tore it to pieces. Suddenly she shook her head and said: "You actually turned down learning 'One Yang Zhi'! I still can't believe that! You are lying to me aren't you?"

Duan Yu laughed at that a bit, and replied: "You make it sound so marvelous and wonderful, but can it feed you and help you make a living? I say that that marten of yours, Lightning, is a lot more formidable. I just don't like the fact that he can kill with just merely a bite." Zhong Ling sighed: "If he can't kill with just a bite, then what good is he for?" Duan Yu replied: "You are such a young girl, why are you thinking about killing and fighting all the time?"

Zhong Ling asked: "You really don't get it? Or are you just pulling my leg?" Duan Yu answered with a question of his own: "What do you mean?" Zhong Ling pointed to the east: "Look over there."

Duan Yu looked over and saw about ten or so clouds of greenish smoke coming from half way up the mountain that she was pointing to. But he can't really figure out what that means.

Zhong Ling continued: "You don't want to kill others. But others want to kill you. You aren't going to just hand them your head on a platter are you? That smoke is coming from Divine Farmer Clan preparing their poison, which will soon be used against No Measure Sword. I don't want to get involved with this mess, let's try and get away from here."

Duan Yu shook the fan in his hand: "This kind of fighting and quarreling in the martial world is getting more and more out of hand. Somebody in No Measure Sword killed someone in Divine Farmer Clan, but now Divine Farmer Clan got Rong Ziju and Gong Guangjie, an eye for an eye, I say they are about even. Even if there are some injustices, they should go to the local magistrate and let them handle it, not just go out and kill! Does our DaLi not have laws anymore?"

Zhong Ling clicked her tongue three times and a bit of disdain and scorn shown up on her face. She replied: "From

what you say, you would think that you are a relative of the king or some big shot official or something. We normal people aren't going to listen to that." She looked up at the sky for a bit, pointed to the southwest, and whispered: "We'll wait until the moon goes behind a cloud, then we'll sneak out in that direction. I don't think the Divine Farmer Clan will catch us if we do that." Duan Yu replied: "No! I'm going to go talk to their leader and tell him not to kill people just because he wants to." Some pity surfaced in Zhong Ling's eyes: "Big Brother, you really don't understand how things work, do you? Divine Farmer Clan is dark, evil, and mean. They are very good at using poison, you just saw how they killed two people back there. Let's not cause more trouble and get out of here." Duan Yu answered: "No! I'm going to have to get involved in this, if you are afraid, then just wait here for me." He stood up and started walking to the east.

Zhong Ling waited until he has walked ten yards or so, then she suddenly chased up to him, her right hand coming out aiming for his shoulder. Duan Yu heard the footsteps and was just about to turn around when she grabbed his right shoulder. Zhong Ling followed with a slight hook with her leg. Duan Yu couldn't keep his balance and fell straight forward, his nose smashed against a rock and started to bleed. He hurriedly stood back up and angrily asked: "What the hell was that for? Damn that hurts!" Zhong Ling said: "I wanted to see once and for all whether you really don't know any kungfu or just pretending. I was doing this for your own good."

Duan Yu replied with some indignation: "What's so good about it?" He wiped his nose with his hand, immediately his hand was covered in blood. Some blood fell onto his chest and caused a couple of red spots on his shirt. He really wasn't that hurt, but seeing so much blood come out, he couldn't help but to start muttering: "Ouch! Ouch!"

Zhong Ling is starting to get a little worried as well, she quickly took out her handkerchief out and tried to wipe

some of the blood off. Duan Yu is still mad at her, so he tried to push her away, saying: "Get away from me, who needs your sympathy?" He doesn't know any kungfu and his moves have no coordination. So as he naturally tried to push her away, his palm headed straight toward her chest. Zhong Ling just reacted and naturally grabbed his wrist, borrowed the force of his push, led his move by her, and added a little push of her own at the end, all in one motion. Duan Yu had no chance and fell over again, this time he banged his head against a rock and fainted.

Zhong Ling saw that he is not moving, so she shouted at him: "Get up! I'm not finished talking to you!" Seeing that he's still not moving, she started to get worried, and quickly went over to him. Noticing that Duan Yu has fainted, she immediately pinched his philtrum, and then started to massage his chest with great effort.

After a while, Duan Yu finally started to come around. Feeling as if he is leaning against something soft and noticing a very faint, sweet, and serene smell, he slowly opened his eyes and saw the beautiful eyes of Zhong Ling looking down at him with great concern. Seeing that he has come around, Zhong Ling let out a huge sigh of relief and said: "Thank goodness you didn't die." Noticing that he is lying in her lap with his head leaned up against her stomach, Duan Yu's heart skipped a beat. However, he immediately felt the throbbing pain on the back of his head and let out a big "Ouch!"

This gave Zhong Ling quite a scare: "What's the matter?" Duan Yu answered: "My... my head hurts like hell." Zhong Ling said: "You are not dead, no need to scream bloody hell." Duan Yu replied: "If I'm dead, how could I scream bloody hell?"

Zhong Ling laughed at that comment, she held his head up. The back of his head has an egg size bump where it banged against the rock, although it's not bleeding, she figured it still hurts a lot. She said: "Well who told you to

make such a perverted move? If it were anyone else, I would have immediately killed him. You only got a bump on your head, you should be thankful."

Duan Yu sat up: "Me? Perverted? What in the world? Where did you get that idea?"

Zhong Ling is young and henceforth only kind of understand man-woman relationships but not really. She blushed and said: "I'm not telling you, all in all you were in the wrong. Who told you to send your palm toward th... there...." Duan Yu suddenly realized what she was talking about and felt very embarrassed, he tried to think of something to say to explain. But he decided that excuses are not right, so he said: "I... I didn't mean to do that." After saying that, he stood up.

Zhong Ling got up as well: "Since you didn't mean to, I'll guess I'll let that one slide. Good thing you finally came around, you scared the hell out of me right then and there." Duan Yu said: "Back in the Sword Lake Palace, if you didn't show up and help me, I was sure to get a couple of slaps on the face. Now that I fell twice, I say everything is even. When it comes down to it, it's all fate, I can't avoid it." Zhong Ling replied: "Why are you talking like that? Are you still mad at me?" Duan Yu answered: "Well you don't expect me to cheer: 'Great, wonderful!' or turn around and thank you when you hit me do you?" Zhong Ling grabbed his hand, said in an apologetic tone: "Please don't be mad at me. I swear I won't hit you ever again." Duan Yu said: "Only if you let me hit you really hard twice."

Zhong Ling really don't want to, but seeing how he has turned around and is about to walk off, she relented: "Alright, I'll let you hit me twice. Just... just don't hit me too hard." Duan Yu replied: "If I don't hit you hard, then how can I get my justice? It has to be hard, if you don't want me to hit you, then just forget it."

Zhong Ling sighed, closed her eyes, and quietly said: "Alright! But after you hit me, you can't be mad anymore."

After a while, Duan Yu still haven't hit her yet. So she opened her eyes and saw Duan Yu looking at her, sort of smiling but not quite. Zhong Ling asked in surprise: "What are you waiting for?" Duan Yu stuck out his right pinky, lightly flicked once on her right cheek, and then lightly flicked on her left cheek. Smiling, he said: "Alright. That's as hard as I could hit you. Did it hurt much?" Zhong Ling can't be any happier: "I knew all along that you were a good person!"

She's standing just a foot or so away from Duan Yu, her fragrance permeates the air. The more Duan Yu look at her the prettier she becomes. He didn't want to move away. After a long while, he finally said: "Alright, now that I got my revenge, I need to go find that SiKong Xuan now."

Zhong Ling anxiously said: "Dummy, don't go! You don't know a thing about the rules of the martial world, if you somehow offend him accidentally, I can't get you out of it this time." Duan Yu smiled and shook his head: "Don't worry, I'll be back soon, just wait for me here." He turns around and starts to walk toward the green smoke.

Zhong Ling stood there trying to decide what to do, then she said: "Alright, like you said: 'Melon seeds ate together, sword blades we take on together'!" She chased up to him and they walked side-by-side toward the smoke.

Soon, they see two men dressed in yellow running up to them. The older one on the left spoke up: "Who is it? What are you here for?" Both men had a medicine bag hanging off their shoulders, each had a wider than usual sabre in hand. Duan Yu answered: "I am Duan Yu, I wish to talk to Master SiKong of your clan." The old man asked: "What for?" Duan Yu replied: "I will tell Master SiKong when I see him." The old man asked: "May I humbly ask which sect are you from and who your master is?"

Duan Yu answered: "I'm not of any sect. My master's surname is Meng, his name is ShuSheng, and he has styled himself XuRu. My master's specialty is logic of changes, and

has had some remarkable success in the field of talks of the divine and systems of diction." He was, of course, referring to his teacher that was invited by his dad to teach him the four Books and the five Classics. That old man, hearing the "talks of the divine" and the "systems of diction", thought they were some weird and strange kungfu. Duan Yu standing there casually fanning himself with the fan in his hand has all the looks of a kungfu master who does not want to show himself. Although the old man has never heard of anyone in the martial world named Meng ShuSheng, but since Duan Yu said he "has had some remarkable success" he probably isn't just some nobody. So he politely said to Duan Yu: "If that's the case, then please wait here for a second while I go and report to my master."

Zhong Ling waited until he hurriedly ran up and around the hill, then turned to Duan Yu and asked: "What was all that lie about 'logic of changes'? What kind of kungfu is that? What if SiKong Xuan tests you later? How are you going to cover that?" Duan Yu replied: "I remember most all of the 'Cycle of Changes'. It probably wouldn't be that bad if SiKong Xuan wants to test me on the meanings and philosophies within it." Zhong Ling just stared at him, not sure how to respond.

The old man came back and said with a stone cold face: "What the hell are you talking about? Master tells you to go see him!" From his looks, he probably got a good bit of scolding from SiKong Xuan. Duan Yu nodded and started to walk up with Zhong Ling.

Soon the three of them soon made their way around the mountain side and came up to twenty or so men sitting around in a pile of scattered rocks. Duan Yu walked up, seeing a short and skinny old man sitting on the tallest rock, he has a goatee beard and has an arrogant expression on his face. Duan Yu figured that he probably is the head of the Divine Farmer Clan SiKong Xuan, so he cupped his fist and said: "Duan Yu is honored to meet Master SiKong."

SiKong Xuan just merely nodded his head, not even getting up, he asked: "Mr. Duan, why are you coming to see me?"

Duan Yu replied: "I heard that your clan and No Measure Sword have become mortal enemies. Having just witnessed two people of No Measure Sword dying a most horrible of deaths, my heart could not bear it and decided to come here in an attempt to try and stop all this killing. 'Enemies are easy to make but hard to break', and besides, this kind of vigilante killing is against the law. If any governor or officials find out, it could be a lot of trouble. I hope that Master SiKong would stop before it is too late and not trouble No Measure Sword anymore."

SiKong Xuan just sat there and listened to him talked. Now that Duan Yu stopped talking, SiKong Xuan still did not respond, just looked at Duan Yu sideways.

Duan Yu continued: "What I just said is a plea for Master SiKong to think it all through before acting." SiKong Xuan is still looking at him with curiosity, suddenly he let out a hearty laugh and said: "Who do you think you are? Actually coming here and try to distract me. Who told you to come here?" Duan Yu answered: "Nobody told me to come here, I came here because I wanted to."

SiKong Xuan hmphed and replied: "I have been walking around in the martial world for forty years, and never once has seen anyone as brazen as you little bastard. Ah-Sheng, seize these two little kids for me." The tall man besides him answered and grabbed Duan Yu's right arm.

Zhong Ling immediately shouted out: "Hold on! Master SiKong, Mr. Duan has only been trying to politely persuade you, if you don't want to listen then don't, why come to blows?" She turns to Duan Yu: "Big Brother, Divine Farmer Clan won't listen to you. We don't need to get involved in other people's business, let's go."

Ah-Sheng has already grabbed Duan Yu's arm and twisted them behind his back, he looked at SiKong Xuan,

waiting for his instructions on what to do next. SiKong Xuan coldly said: "The thing that the Divine Farmer Clan hates the most is other people meddling in our affairs. There must be something more to you two babies coming here and wasting my time. Ah-Hong, seize the girl." Another man answered as he extends his hands toward Zhong Ling.

Zhong Ling stepped three steps to the side and said: "Master SiKong, in truth, I'm not scared of you. It's just that my mom and dad do not want me to make trouble. So let my Big Brother Duan go, or else when you force me to respond in kind, it would not be much fun."

SiKong Xuan laughed heartily at that comment: "Well aren't we boasting a little too much? Ah-Hong! What are you waiting for?" Ah-Hong answered again as he tries to grab Zhong Ling's wrist. Zhong Ling pulled her right arm back and sent her left palm out. The palm is like a knife as it heads toward Ah-Hong's forehead. Ah-Hong lowered his head to avoid the move, but Zhong Ling's right fist came in from underneath in an uppercut. It caught him squarely on the jaw and knocked him onto his back.

SiKong Xuan casually observed: "Seems like the girl can do a thing or two, but not enough to be able to get away with it here." He shot a look over at a tall old man besides him and waved his right hand. The old man immediately stood up and stepped up to Zhong Ling. He is a whole two feet taller than Zhong Ling and his hands came in from above, like talons, straight for her shoulders.

Zhong Ling immediately dodges out of the way, but the man's left hand merely missed her face by inches. Feeling the piercing wind caused by the move, Zhong Ling started to get a little scared, she spoke up: "Master SiKong, tell him to stop. Else don't blame me for being impolite, and when my dad scolds me for this in the future, you won't be in such a good shape either." As she is talking, she dodged three more moves from the old man. SiKong Xuan commanded: "Grab her!" The old man led on with his left hand while his

right hand drew a little circle, suddenly he flipped his palm down and grabbed onto Zhong Ling's right arm.

Zhong Ling let out a little scream and squirmed in pain. She shook her left hand and hissed a couple of times. A flash of white shot out. The old man let out a muted groan, let her arm go, and sat down on the ground. The marten has bitten him on the back of his hand and has already jumped back into Zhong Ling's waiting hands.

A middle-aged man jumped out from beside SiKong Xuan and helped the old man up. The old man's whole body was shaking and the back of his hand has turned pitch-black. Zhong Ling hissed twice more and her marten scrambled towards Ah-Sheng's face. Ah-Sheng tried to bat it away, but the marten instead just bit him on his hand. Ah-Sheng's kungfu is not as good as the old man's, so he is even less able to tolerate it. Immediately he curled up into a ball and started to scream. Zhong Ling grabbed Duan Yu's arm, started to walk off quickly, and whispered: "We are in trouble now, let's get out of here!"

The men sitting around SiKong Xuan are all the top fighters in the Divine Farmer Clan, these men have dealt with poison for most of their lives and has seen pretty much every kind of poison there is. But this marten's lightning speed and incredible poison is something that none of them has ever heard of. SiKong Xuan shouted: "Seize this girl this instant! Don't let her get away!" Four men answered his order and jumped up. They split into two groups and came at the two of them from opposite sides.

Zhong Ling hissed several more times and the marten jumped from one person to the next. In a blink of an eye, all four men are either rolling on the ground or curled up into a ball.

The members of the Divine Farmer Clan all know that this little marten is indeed something to be reckoned with, but nobody wanted to seem cowardly in front of the leader. So seven or eight more men came chasing after them. Zhong

Ling threatened: "If you don't want to live then come on!" The men are all holding a weapon, be it a medicine back or a short sabre, all hoping to try and bat away the marten with his weapon. But the marten is faster than any flying weapon in the world, and soon all of the men were rolling on the ground as well.

SiKong Xuan tossed off his robe, reached into his bosom and took out a small bottle. He applied the contents of the bottle to his hands and arms, and started chasing after Duan Yu and Zhong Ling. He jumped in front of the two of them and said: "Stop!"

The marten jumped from Zhong Ling's hands towards his nose. SiKong Xuan held his palm up vertically, but couldn't help but feel nervous. He is not sure whether or not this medicine that works against snake poison will work against this poisonous marten that he has never heard of before. If it doesn't then his life and the entire clan is destroyed. The marten was just about to bite down on his hand when suddenly it twisted in the air, and bounced back to Zhong Ling by rebounding off of his hand with its back feet. Turns out that inside the marten there is stored a great amount of snake poison, which is exactly what the medicine that SiKong Xuan applied works the best against. SiKong Xuan was delighted, immediately he struck out with his left palm. The palm wind was fierce, Zhong Ling could not get out of the way and almost fell over. Duan Yu, on the other hand, was completely overwhelmed by what is left of the palm wind and fell back on the ground.

Zhong Ling anxiously hissed a couple of more times, urging the marten to attack. The marten jumped out again, but it could not bear the medicine on SiKong Xuan's palms. So it instead went after his head and legs, but SiKong Xuan waved his arms around, protecting his body, making it impossible to get close.

SiKong Xuan is nevertheless still afraid of the marten, and he kept on giving orders to his men.

Twenty or so clan members surrounded them, each with an herb in hand. They lit the herb and smoke started to fill the air. Duan Yu just got up when he suddenly felt light headed and fell back down again. In a daze, he saw that Zhong Ling also fell down from the smoke. Two clan members stepped forth to seize Zhong Ling, but the marten, in protecting its master, bit both of them. Everyone stepped back in fear, still surrounding the two of them, but nobody dared to seize them.

SiKong Xuan ordered: "Start burning Manly Yellow on the east side and Deer Musk on the south side. The others get out of the way."

The clan members followed the orders and started to burn Manly Yellow and Deer Musk. There is not an herb or poison that the Divine Farmer Clan is not equipped with, not only that, all they have are the best picks of the drugs. The pure Manly Yellow and Deer Musk they burned immediately let out a mace like cloud of smoke, carried by the southeasterly wind, the smoke slowly descended upon Zhong Ling. However, the marten turned out to be immune to the smoke, still jumping back and forth among the clan members. Before anyone knew it five more clan members had been bitten.

Suddenly, an idea popped up in SiKong Xuan's mind. He ordered: "Start piling up dirt, let's bury this girl and her marten alive." The clan members immediately started to dig up dirt and throwing it onto Zhong Ling's body.

Duan Yu thought to himself that he is the cause of all this trouble. How could he live on if Zhong Ling is going to die. So he summoned up all his strength and flipped on top of Zhong Ling's body. Holding her tight, he shouted: "We are dying together!" The dirt kept on raining down on his head.

The words "We are dying together" hit home with SiKong Xuan. He looked around, seeing twenty or so clan members rolling on the ground in pain, seven or eight of them are very important members of the clan, and two of them are

actually his martial brothers. Although his anger would be vented if he killed the girl right now, all these people would probably die too. The marten's poison is unlike anything he has ever seen before, he probably has to get the remedy from her in order to cure it. So he ordered: "Don't bury their heads, leave them alive."

Soon, the two of them are buried up to their heads. Zhong Ling felt like an enormous weight has been placed on her body. And Duan Yu has held on to her the entire time. Only their head is not covered by dirt, neither one of them could move an inch.

SiKong Xuan asked: "Little girl, do you want to live or die?" Zhong Ling answered: "Of course I want to live. If you kill me and Big Brother Duan here, then a lot of you guys would die too." SiKong Xuan replied: "Good, then quickly hand over the cure for that marten poison of yours, that way I'll let you live." Zhong Ling shook her head: "Not just my life, both of our lives." SiKong Xuan replied: "Alright, I'll let both of you live. Where is the cure?" Zhong Ling answered: "I don't have it on me. Only my dad can cure Lightning's poison. I told you earlier not to make me to use force, or else my dad would be mad at me and you wouldn't get anything good out of it either." SiKong Xuan replied angrily: "Still bullshitting at a time like this? See if I just leave you two here and let you two die of hunger!"

Zhong Ling replied: "Everything I have told you is true, why don't you believe me? Ay! All in all, this whole matter is really troublesome. Probably won't be able to hide it from my dad, what do I do then?" SiKong Xuan asked: "What's your dad's name?" Zhong Ling answered: "You are not a baby, how come you are so unreasonable? Like I can just go around telling everyone my dad's name."

SiKong Xuan has been making a living in the martial world for decades now and has earned a name and some fame in the world. But today he has just about ran out of ideas regarding these two little kids. He bit down and

ordered: "Bring me a torch! Let's light the little girl's hair on fire and see if she'll talk!" A clan member handed over the torch, SiKong Xuan grabbed a hold of it and walked up to the two of them.

In the light of the fire, Zhong Ling could not help but get scared by his hideous expression. She shouted out: "Hey! Hey! Don't burn my hair. If the hair is on fire, then the head is going to hurt like crazy. If you don't believe me, then why don't you try it on your beard?" A hideous grin appeared on SiKong Xuan's face: "Of course it hurts, I don't need to burn my beard to know that." Holding up the torch, he gave it a shake right in front of Zhong Ling's face. Zhong Ling let out a little scream.

Duan Yu hugged her tightly and shouted: "Goat beard, I started this whole mess, why don't you burn my hair instead!" Zhong Ling shouted back: "No! It'll hurt you too." SiKong Xuan offered: "Well if you are scared of getting hurt, then hand over the cure so I can start working on my brothers."

Zhong Ling replied: "How dumb are you really? I have already told you, only my dad can cure Lightning's poison, even my mom does not know how. My Lightning is very very rare, his bite is filled with strange and exotic poison. You think it's that easy to cure?"

SiKong Xuan can hear the people that have been bitten groaning all around him, so he knows that the poison is very strong. These men care very much for face, they wouldn't even mutter a sound even if a hand or a foot is broken or cut off. The medicine for snake venom has already been applied to every one of them. But from the continued groans, it is obvious that the clan's anti-venom that has always worked before is having no effect. Several people have tried to apply some medicines that work against scorpion, centipede, or spider poisons, but that has only increased the volume of their groans. SiKong Xuan stared down at Zhong

Ling with rage and shouted: "Who is your old man? Tell me his name now!"

Zhong Ling asked: "You really want me to say it? Aren't you scared to find out?"

This set SiKong Xuan off, he lifted up the torch and was just about to set Zhong Ling's hair on fire. All of a sudden he felt an incredible amount of pain coming from the back of his head, something has bitten him there. Shocked, SiKong Xuan immediately took a breath to protect his head and heart, he tossed the torch away and tried to grab whatever is on the back of his head. Suddenly the back of his hand was bitten as well. Turns out that the marten has dug its way out of the dirt and taken advantage of the fact that SiKong Xuan was distracted and attacked. After being bit twice in a row, SiKong Xuan is scared nearly out of his wits. Immediately he sat down and started to try to force the poison out using his inner force. The clan members were busily trying to cover the marten with dirt again, but this time the marten jumped up and bit two more men. A couple of more white flashes in the dark and the marten has jumped into the bushes and disappeared.

SiKong Xuan's underlings hurriedly took out medicines and herbs that works against snake venom and start applying it to their master. Some of the medicines were taken orally along with a ginseng they had available. SiKong Xuan had to divide his strength against the two places where he was bitten and soon it became obvious to him that he can't keep this up. Biting down hard, he grabbed the dagger around his waist with his left hand and cut of his right arm at the elbow. The clan members all trembled at the sight and scrambled to put some drugs that stops bleeding on the wound. But blood gushing out of the wound washed away the medicines as soon as they were applied. Eventually someone tore a piece of clothing off and tightly bandaged up SiKong Xuan's elbow, finally stopping the bleeding.

After witnessing such a harrowing scene, Zhong Ling's face turned white as she stopped shouting. SiKong Xuan asked in a low voice: "After being bitten by that devil marten, how many days do you have?" Zhong Ling answered in a shaky voice: "My dad said up to seven days, but... but since Master SiKong your inner strength is so strong and is so good at kungfu. Maybe... I'm sure you'll live for longer than that."

SiKong Xuan didn't reply, instead he ordered: "Pull that guy out of there." The clan members pulled Duan Yu out of the dirt pile. Zhong Ling panicked: "Hey! Hey! This has nothing to do with him! Don't hurt him!" She tried to take advantage of the moment and struggle out of the dirt pile, but the clan members immediately filled the space left by Duan Yu with more dirt. Zhong Ling sees there is nothing more she can do, so she started crying.

Duan Yu is quite scared himself, but he forced himself to calm down. Smiling, he said: "Miss Zhong, a true man faces death like it's nothing, don't show any weaknesses in front of these bad people." Zhong Ling answered between sobs: "I'm not a man! I don't want to face your death like it's nothing! I want to show weakness!"

SiKong Xuan ordered in a heavy voice: "Give this fellow some Intestine Fragmenter (Duan Chang San), give him the seven days worth of dosage." A clan member poured out of a medicine bottle about half a bottle worth of red powder, and forced them into Duan Yu's mouth. Zhong Ling cried out: "That's poison, don't eat it!" Duan Yu knew it was a very potent poison when he heard the words "Intestine Fragmenter". But figuring that since he is in the hands of others, there is nothing he can do to refuse to take the poison. So he swallowed the powder, smacked his lips, smiled, and said: "Taste pretty sweet. Master SiKong, how about you eat the other half of the bottle?"

SiKong Xuan just hmped at him in anger. Zhong Ling let out a little laugh in the middle of a sob, and then went right

on crying.

SiKong Xuan said to Duan Yu: "This Intestine Fragmenter will break out after seven days, splitting your intestines into inch long pieces. Go and get the cure for the marten's poison, if you get back here in seven days, then I'll give you the cure for it and let the girl go too." Zhong Ling cuts in: "Just the drug does not work, you have to have my dad use his unique inner strength to force the poison out." SiKong Xuan replied: "Then he is just going to get your dad here to get you out." Zhong Ling replied: "Easy for you to say. Like my dad would leave the mountain, he wouldn't even take a step out of the valley." SiKong Xuan did not reply to her last comment.

Duan Yu offered: "How about this? Why don't all of us go to Miss Zhong's home? Then you can ask your dad to cure the poison, wouldn't that be fast and effective?" Zhong Ling replied: "No, no! My dad has sworn that if someone takes one step in my family valley, no matter who it is, only death awaits him."

SiKong Xuan thought to himself: "The No Measure Sword matter is not settled yet, can't leave this place. If I did, it's not like the Kid Elder of Heaven Mountain would let me live. I would only die a lot worse of a death." By now the itch and numbness from the marten bite at the back of his head is getting worse and worse, he finally let out several groans of pain.

Zhong Ling said: "Master SiKong, sorry about this." SiKong Xuan angrily replied: "Sorry my ass!" Duan Yu cuts in (he seems to have a habit of this): "Master SiKong, using such vulgar language toward Miss Zhong is not the conduct of a gentleman."

SiKong Xuan angrily rebuked: "Your grandma wasn't one either!" However, he thought to himself: "When the 'Life-Death Insignia' in my body breaks out, the suffering is really unbearable. Better to die like this, at least it's straightforward and clear cut." So he turned to Zhong Ling:

"I don't care about all the details, don't invite your dad for the cure is fine as well. We'll just all die together here." His words were filled with sadness and resignation.

Zhong Ling thought about all this for a bit and said: "Let me out of here, and I'll write a letter to my dad asking him to come here and rescue you. And you send a person who is not afraid to die to deliver it." SiKong Xuan responded: "I want this fellow named Duan to go, why send anyone else?" Zhong Ling replied: "Man you got bad memory! If someone takes one step in my family valley, no matter who it is, that someone will die. Didn't I already tell you about this? I don't want my Big Brother Duan to die, don't you know?" SiKong Xuan answered: "He can't die, then the people in my clan should? If he can't go then don't go, let's all die together. See which one of us dies first."

Zhong Ling started to sob again: "What kind of a person are you? Bullying a little girl like me? People in the martial world will all find out about this and they all say that Master SiKong of Divine Farmer Clan has dragged his name through dirt and is not a real man."

SiKong Xuan only sat there and worried about using his inner strength to combat the poison, completely ignoring her.

Duan Yu spoke up: "Then just let me go then. Miss Zhong, since I'm going to tell him the news and telling him to save you, I don't think he would do much harm to me." Zhong Ling's face suddenly lit up: "I got it! Follow my plan. Don't tell my dad where I am, that way if he kills you, then he wouldn't know where I am. Just leave as soon as you lead him here, or else it would not be good." Duan Yu nodded: "This plan seems to work."

Zhong Ling turned to SiKong Xuan: "Master SiKong, Big Brother Duan is going to leave as soon as he arrives. So how are you going to give the cure for 'Intestine Fragmenter'?" SiKong Xuan pointed to a huge rock far to the northwest: "I'll instruct someone to wait there with the cure. When Mr. Duan

gets to that rock, he'll get the cure." Since he wants Duan Yu to go and save his life, his words became considerably more polite. So he ordered his men to dig Zhong Ling out, but first they handcuffed her hands and then dug out her lower body.

Zhong Ling asked: "If you don't take the cuffs off, how can I write a letter?" SiKong Xuan replied: "A weird girl like you, writing a letter probably would lead to more tricks. Just give Mr. Duan something on you that proves that his words are true and that would do."

Zhong Ling laughed and said: "I hate writing, so happy to hear that you don't want me to write. What do I have on me? Um, Big Brother Duan, take the pair of shoes that I have on. My mom and dad will recognize those."

Duan Yu nodded and bent down to take off her shoes. As his left hand held her bare foot, feeling its fine skin and smoothness, his heart shook and he couldn't help but look up at her face. They smiled at each other. Under the fire light, he sees that there are still tears on her cheeks and yet her eyes are filled with happiness. He was spellbound.

SiKong Xuan is getting a little impatient, so he shouted: "Go already! What are you two kids doing staring at each other? Brother Duan, get done with it already. When you get the person here, then of course I would let the girl go so she can be your wife. Then you'll have plenty of time to feel her foot."

Duan Yu and Zhong Ling both blushed like crazy. Duan Yu hurriedly took off Zhong Ling's shoes and put them in his shirt. But he still can't refrain from taking another look at Zhong Ling. At this, Zhong Ling let out a coquettish laugh.

SiKong Xuan spoke up again: "Brother Duan, please go and come quickly! All of our lives is in your hands. If there is some hold-up then none of us will live. Miss Zhong, how long does it take to get to your dad's place?" Zhong Ling answered: "Two days if he hurries. I would say he would be back in four days at the most." SiKong Xuan felt a little better, but still urged: "Then go quickly!"

Zhong Ling spoke up: "I'm going to tell Big Brother Duan how to go, all of you get away. I don't want any of you listening in." SiKong Xuan waved his hand and all the clan members walked away. Zhong Ling added: "You too." SiKong Xuan thought to himself: "Once I'm cured, if I don't show you little baby a little something then SiKong Xuan has mistaken himself for a man!" But he got up and walked off.

Zhong Ling sighed: "Big Brother Duan, we have only met today, and already we have to be separated." Duan Yu smiled and replied: "It's only for four days, no big deal really."

Zhong Ling stared at Duan Yu with the two big eyes of hers for a while. Finally, she said: "First go see my mom, tell her about the situation and let her go talk to my dad. This way it'll be much easier." She then drew out directions to her home on the ground with her feet. As it turns out, Zhong Ling lives in a valley on the west shore of the LanCang River, not very far away. It is very well hidden and the entrance has several traps, switches, and secret codes. Without specific directions, it is very hard to find and enter the valley. Duan Yu always had a good memory and easily memorized all the direction that Zhong Ling gave him. After she finished, he said: "Alright, I'm going now." He turned around and started to walk.

After about ten steps or so, Zhong Ling suddenly remembered something and called out: "Hey! Come back here!" Duan Yu asked: "What?" Zhong Ling said to him after he walked back: "Don't say that your surname is Duan, and especially don't say that your dad knows 'One Yang Zhi'. Because... Because my dad might start getting ideas." Duan Yu smiled and thought that this little girl is just worrying too much, but it is all in good intentions towards him. So he just said "Alright," as he turned and walked off.

Chapter 2: The Jade Cliff Under the Moonlight

Fan translation by Moinllieon ([send email](#)) [Second Edition]
wuxiapedia.com / www.spcnet.tv

After all that mess, the moon has risen to the middle of the sky. Duan Yu kept on walking west. Even though he does not know any kungfu, his youth enabled him to keep this up. After about ten kilometers he has already arrived in the back mountains of No Measure Mountain. He suddenly heard the sound of water running. Feeling thirsty, he went searching and found the creek. Under the moonlight the creek water looked clear and beautiful. Just as he put his into the creek, he heard sound of a branch cracking followed by the footsteps of two people. Duan Yu immediately lied down by the creek, not daring to make a noise.

Someone said: "There is a creek here, let's get a couple of drinks here before continuing." The voice sounded familiar to Duan Yu as he suddenly recognized it as Gan GuangHao, the disciple of Zuo ZiMu. Duan Yu became even more still. The two of them walked up to the creek and started drinking. After a bit, Gan GuangHao spoke up: "Sister Ge, looks like we are already out of danger. Let's rest a while before going on." The girl seemed to have agreed as it sounded like both of them sat down by the creek.

The girl spoke up: "You sure that the Divine Farmer Clan won't have anyone this way?" Her voice is shaky, obviously scared. Gan GuangHao tried to calm her: "Don't worry, this path is as hidden as can be. Even some of us in the East Faction don't know about it, not to mention the Divine Farmer Clan." The girl asked: "Then how did you know about this?" Gan GuangHao replied: "Every five days, my master would take some of us here to try to crack the secret of the 'No Measure Jade Cliff'. All these years, all we did was stare

at the rock like a bunch of retards. Master kept on saying something to the effect of 'to get things done you must show perseverance and determination' and 'good things come to those with aspirations'. But I really just can't stand it anymore, so sometimes I excuse myself to do that kind of personal business to come out here and wander around. That's how I found this path."

The girl laughed a little and said: "So you don't want to put in the work and ran off. I say in your faction, you probably have the least perseverance and determination." Gan GuangHao laughed and replied: "Sister Ge, in the competition five years ago, when I lost to you...." The girl cuts in: "Don't you say that you lost to me again. You pretended that your inner strength was weaker and let me win on purpose. Others can't tell, but don't you think I know?"

Duan Yu thought to himself: "So this girl is a disciple of the West Faction of No Measure Sword."

Gan GuangHao replied: "The moment I saw you, I swore to myself that I will spend the rest of my life with you no matter what. Luckily such a rare chance came today with the Divine Farmer Clan coming to attack. Not to mention that pair of bastard guy and girl and their stinking marten. The entire Sword Lake Palace was a mess, giving us such a great opportunity to run away. Wouldn't you say that this is 'good things come to those with aspirations'?" The girl laughed a bit and tenderly replied: "I say 'good things came to those with aspirations' for me as well." Gan GuangHao replied: "Sister Ge, if you treat me this way, then I would listen to whatever you say for the rest of my life."

The girl sighed: "With us betraying our masters and running off like this, we can't ever stand in the martial world ever again. We should go as far away as we can, find a nice and secret place and hide there away from our masters and sect members. I'm scared just thinking about them finding us." Gan GuangHao replied: "I say you don't have that much

to worry about. Seems like the Divine Farmer Clan came prepared this time. Besides the two of us, I don't think anyone else would be able to escape." The girl sighed again: "Hopefully."

Duan Yu became very angry and thought to himself: "The two of you becoming husband and wife and running off when seeing that there is trouble is really no big deal. But why wish death upon your master and martial brothers? Such evil hearts." But he was still wise enough to figure out that if they found out he is here they would kill him to keep this quiet. So he still did not make a noise.

The girl asked: "What is the big deal about this 'No Measure Jade Cliff'? You have lived here for ten years now, haven't you at least found something?"

Gan GuangHao replied: "Since we are together now, I have nothing to hide from you. Master said that a long while back, at that time his master was the head of the East Faction, under the moonlight, he often sees faint reflections practicing swords on the cliff. Sometimes it's a man, sometimes it's a woman, and then other times they are sparring. The kind of sword skill they were displaying was something that he has never even dreamed of, much less heard of or seen. It is as if they were angels. He hoped to learn a couple of moves, but not only are the reflections on the cliff just too fast and too amazing, but they also seem supernatural as if nonexistent. He just can't make out anything clearly, much less learn a move or two. The angels don't appear regularly either, sometimes they appear every night, sometimes there are months between appearances. My master's master became so obsessed with the reflections on the cliff that he actually became worse and worse at our own sect's sword skills and doesn't even train his students anymore. That's how the West Faction won later on. Sister Ge, when your master's master came to live in Sword Lake Palace, did she see anything?"

The girl replied: "I heard from my master that her master saw the images on the cliff as well. But grand master only saw the woman and never seen any of man angel. Maybe it was because her master was a woman so only the female angel appeared to her. But after two years, she was gone as well. Her master also said that the sword skills were incredible, but they were just too fast and the reflections were too blurry for her to see it clearly. The cliff is separated by the canyon and the Sword Lake, so she couldn't get closer to have a better look. Grand master obviously received a gift from the heavens, yet she just cannot learn even a move or two. For that you can just imagine how she felt inside. After the reflections stopped appearing, she would spend days upon days staring at the cliff. She just got weaker and weaker until she died of illness about half a year later. She died lying on the peak, and would not let her disciples move her back to Sword Lake Palace. Master said that even as she drew her last breath she was still staring at the cliff." She paused a bit before continuing: "Brother Gan, do you really believe there are angels? Or are our grandmasters lying to us?"

Gan GuangHao replied: "I don't think both our grandmasters made up such a story to deceive their disciples. Even if we believed it, then what? Besides, Martial Uncle Sheng told me that he saw the images with his very own two eyes. But are there really angels in the world? That I do not know."

The girl asked: "Is it possible that it's two masters practicing swords in front of the cliff and was reflected onto the cliff?" Gan GuangHao answered: "Grandmaster thought about that as well at the time. But right in front of the cliff is the Sword Lake, and west of the lake is the canyon. Even if the two master martial artists knew how to walk on water and were practicing on the lake, grandmaster would have seen them. If they were practicing on this side of the lake, then they really are too far away to cast any kind of

reflection onto the cliff." The girl said: "After my grandmaster died, her disciples performed rites and prayed in front of the cliff every night, hoping the angels would appear again. But they never did see it again. My master also wants to just get one glance at the angels, but it just so happens that we have lost both contests to your East Faction in the last ten years."

Gan GuangHao replied: "From now on, there is no East or West Faction between us. We East and West is connected in marriage and merge as one...." The girl moaned a couple of times and said: "S... stop that!" Obviously Gan GuangHao is trying to get a little closer with her, but the girl is refusing. Gan GuangHao spoke up: "From this day forth, if I ever betray your heart in anyway, then let me fall into this creek and become a turtle." The girl coquettishly laughed: "You turn into a turtle? Then what does that say about me?" { Note, in Chinese street talk, a turtle is a man whose wife is cheating on him. }

When Duan Yu heard that, he can't help but let out a laugh. As soon as the laughter came out he knew he was in trouble. So he jumped up and started to run. Gan GuangHao's voice came from behind him: "Who is it?" His voice was followed by the sound of his footsteps, coming after him. { Duan Yu seems to have problems controlling his sense of humor doesn't he? }

Duan Yu can't believe his luck and ran for his life. Suddenly, a flash of white came from the west. A girl with a sword in hand is coming down the slope as if to cut him off. Duan Yu let out an "Ai-Yo!" and turned toward the east. All the while he kept on praying: "Great Benevolent and Merciful Bodhisattva, please bless and protect your humble disciple Duan Yu out of this mess!" He can still hear the footsteps of Gan GuangHao chasing after him so he kept right on running. After a while, he started having trouble keeping this up and his breathing became very hard, Gan

GuangHao suddenly spoke up: "Sister Ge, block that pass over there."

Duan Yu thought to himself: "You giving your life away is really no big deal. But if you die you are taking Miss Zhong's life with you, as well as all the people in the Divine Farmer Clan. Now that indeed is a sin. Amida Buddha and Bodhisattva." Then his thoughts turned: "Duan Yu my good man, so what if they become turtles, what does that have to do with you? Why did you laugh for no reason whatsoever? With that laugh you have killed dozens of lives! Only unrivaled beauties can bring down cities with a smile or a laugh. Who do you think you are with this little laugh of yours? What are you planning on bringing down?" Even though he is blaming and scolding himself in his mind, his legs had not let up yet. By now he doesn't really care where he is going, just as long as it is deeper into the woods.

{A little commentary by me. Duan Yu here refers to a idiom saying that unrivaled beauties destroys cities and kingdoms with a smile, it comes from a true story very early in Chinese history. However, it also is a basic concept in ancient Chinese culture. As expected in such chauvinistic society as ancient China was, many failures of kings and lords are not blamed on themselves but on women whom they associate with. There are many examples of this. In 771 BC, King Zhou You's own personal ignorance and foolishness that led to his demise was blamed on his consort Bao Si (who's famous smile was worth one thousand gold pieces). At the end of the Spring and Autumn period, the fall of the state of Wu was not blamed on the Lord of Yue, who put an end to Wu in revenge for an earlier loss, but on the fact the Lord of Wu was infatuated with Xi Shi, a girl from the state of Yue. In A.D. 755, An LuShan, a trusted official of the Emperor of Tang rebelled and almost overthrew the Tang dynasty. The Emperor of Tang's failure as a ruler was not blamed, his favorite consort, Consort Yang, was! Jin Yong himself delved into this particular phenomenon of Chinese history in Duke

of Mt. Deer and its story about Chen YuanYuan. To me, the section during which Chen YuanYuan reflected on her life was the best part of all of Duke of Mt. Deer and one of the most thought provoking and poignant sections that I have ever read. Actually all of this is not really commentary but merely some observations that I have made. }

After running for a while more, Duan Yu's legs felt completely numb and soft. Suddenly he heard the sound of water running, very loud sound in fact, as if the tides were just coming in. He looked up and saw a huge waterfall falling off of a cliff to the northwest. Over the water noise, he heard Gan GuangHao's voice: "Just ahead of you is the restricted area of our sect, no one can enter. If you just go forward a few more meters, you would be trespassing and will die without a burial place!" Duan Yu thought to himself: "Even if I don't trespass into the restricted area, it's not like you'll let me go. Best I could hope for is dying with a burial place. Really not much difference between having a burial place and not having one." So he picked up his speed even more. Gan GuangHao shouted even louder: "Stop now! Don't you want to live? Just ahead is....."

Duan Yu laughed and replied back: "I want to live, that's why I'm runnin...." Before he could finish his sentence, his foot suddenly had nothing to step on. He doesn't know any kungfu and is in such a hurry, how could he possibly pull back from that? So he just fell. He screamed: "Ai-Yo!" But by now his body is already more than twenty meters below the top of the cliff where he lost his footing.

Duan Yu wildly waved his arm around, desperately hoping to be able to grab onto something. But as he is doing so, he fell another two hundred meters or so. Suddenly his bottom hit something and his body was sprung back upwards. Turns out that he fell onto an old pine tree that was growing out of the face of the cliff. With a terrible rumble, the huge trunk of the pine snapped, but the force of Duan Yu's fall had been mostly cancelled out.

Duan Yu started to fall down again. This time he reached out with both his arms and grabbed onto another trunk of the pine tree. So there he is, hanging in midair, swinging back and forth. He looked down and did not see the bottom of the canyon, merely clouds. At this moment, his body has been swung against the cliff. He immediately reached out with his left hand and grabbed onto a shorter branch close to the face of the cliff and found a place for his foot to balance himself. Only now was he finally able to calm down and slowly move his body completely up against the face of the cliff. He looked up to the old pine tree and said: "Grandfather pine, thank you so much for your display of your abilities that saved my life. Back then your ancestor helped Qing ShiHuang (first emperor in Chinese history) get out of the rain and was granted the title of 'Fifth Rank Senior Official'. But how can saving a life compare with protecting against the rain? I'm going to give you the position of 'Sixth Rank Senior Official'. No, on second thought, definitely 'Seventh' or 'Eighth Rank Senior Official'!"

He looked around him carefully and saw that the cliff has a huge crack in it, one which he might be able to use to scale down. He took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself and thought: "Gan GuangHao and that Sister Ge of his surely would have thought that I am dead by now. No way in the world could they have guessed that I would be rescued by an 'eighth Ranked Senior Official'. They have probably already left the mountain to work on their 'merging of East and West Factions'. Who knows what kind of danger is on the bottom of this cliff, but my life is living on borrowed time anyway, doesn't really matter where I lose it again. But since Bodhisattva is protecting me, it's better not to lose it for her."

So he started to slowly descend along the crack. Inside the crack grew a lot of weeds and small plants, so there really is no danger of losing his footing and falling again. The only problem is this cliff seemed to go on forever, after a

while, his clothing were full of holes and rips from the plants along the crack, not to mention his hands and feet. After what seemed like forever, he still haven't reached the bottom, but fortunately as the cliff gets to the bottom it became less and less steep, not straight down anymore. So by then Duan Yu was able to just half-roll and half-crawl down, which is much faster.

But the sound of water splashing just kept on getting louder and louder, Duan Yu started to worry again: "What if the bottom of this is white water rapids?" Large water pellets were hitting his face, which was actually kind of painful.

Before he had too much time to think all this over, and it wasn't like he had much choice in the matter, he has reached the bottom of the cliff. When he stood up, he could not help but to scream in astonishment. For on the cliff on the left side there is a waterfall falling from the sky like a jade dragon falling from the sky into a big and unusually clear lake. Despite of the waterfall, the lake is not filled up, meaning that there must be a way for the water to leave the valley. The water where the waterfall enters the lake is in turmoil; however, merely a little bit over twenty meters away from the waterfall the waters become calm and flat as a mirror. The moon shines down onto the lake as there is also a moon shining back from the lake.

Facing this scene, Duan Yu was left agaping, not even able to sigh in astonishment. He looked over to the side and saw several bushes of camelias by the lake shore, looking as if they are alive under the moonlight. The camelias of YuNan are the best in the world and Duan Yu has always loved them. So now he actually stopped thinking about the predicament he is in and walked over to get a closer look at the flowers. All the while muttering to himself: "Even though there're lots of flowers here, there are only a couple of types really. And only these few 'Feathered Shirt, Rainbow Skirt' are better than the ones at my house. These 'Lotus Every Step' over here, on the other hand, aren't pure at all."

After enjoying the camelias for a while, he walked over to the lake and drank some water. The water felt clean and soothing on the tongue with an unusual sweetness as a cool and smooth string of water went all the way into his stomach. After recovering from the drink, he stood up and walked alongside the lake shore hoping to find a way out.

The lake is oval in shape, and more than half of it is hidden underneath bushes of flowers and trees. He walked from west to east and then back again to circle the lake once, which a trip of about one and a-half kilometers. It turns out that the cliff surrounds the lake on all four sides with no paths out. The side that he fell from is the least steep portion of all, so it is impossible to climb on the others. Looking up, he sees that the cliff extends to above the clouds. Getting down from halfway was almost impossible, but climbing back up really is impossible. Duan Yu thought to himself: "Even someone with the best kungfu in the world won't be able to get up there, so it's obvious there is not much difference between knowing or not knowing kungfu."

By now it was getting close to dawn, but the entire place remained incredibly still. Not a single trace or sign of an animal, not to mention humans; the only thing that could be heard was a couple of birds chirping at each other. Duan Yu started to worry again: "It is no big deal if I starve to death here, but then that would mean that Miss Zhong would die as well. I can't let her down like that. Not to mention my mom and dad are probably worried sick about me."

He sat down by the lake and worried in vain, unable to come up with a single idea as to what to do. In desperation, he started to imagine: "What if I can turn into a fish, then I could swim up the waterfall and get out of here." He turned to look at the waterfall more closely, suddenly he noticed that the cliff besides it is smooth like jade. He figured that this is probably due to the fact that a long time ago the flow of water was much more than it is now and wore the cliff to its present smooth state. Then the water flow decreased and

exposed this smooth as glass and bright as a mirror part of the cliff.

Suddenly, the conversation between Gan GuangHao and that Sister Xin of his flashed in Duan Yu's mind: "So this must be the 'No Measure Jade Cliff' that they were talking about. They said that back then, when the moon is bright, the head of both East and West Factions often saw images of angels practicing swords on the cliff. This cliff is right beside the lake, for the image to reflect onto it, they really have to be practicing in the middle of the lake. If I stand here on the east of the lake my image could reflect onto the cliff as well, but the cliff on this side is straight up and blocks out the moonlight, which would make that impossible. Ah! I get it! Must be because there are some waterfowls flying close to the surface of the lake so their images were reflected onto the cliff. From afar, then of course, the movements are incredible, fast, and strange. They have already assumed that it was angels practicing swords, so that is what they thought they saw everytime. Of course, they can't make anything out of the display of 'sword skills' and eventually went down the wrong path and became obsessed."

Once he figured all this out, he couldn't help but laugh a little. It has been fifteen to sixteen hours since the dinner at Sword Lake Palace and he is getting very hungry. So he walked over to some bushes that had greenish red wild fruits grown all over them. He picked one off and bit down, it tasted just as sour as can be. But as hungry as he was, he didn't care and ate ten or so in a row. After filling up somewhat, he suddenly felt tired and sore all over his body. So he lied down on the grassy knoll and had a great sleep.

This was one of the best sleeps that he has ever had. By the time he woke up, the sun is already slightly to the west. There was a rainbow in the middle of the lake, just as beautiful as can be. Duan Yu knew that rainbows in this place are common because of the waterfall so he thought to himself: "To be able to see such a scene before I die means

that my fortune is not bad. And to think that I would die here among the flowers on the lakeside, not bad elegance there either. Such a beautiful lake, too bad the camelias aren't really of great standards."

After sleeping, his spirits has picked up greatly: "Maybe there is an exit in this place hidden behind the trees and the bushes. I was too much in a hurry last night and might have missed it." So he once again walked alongside the lake in search of an exit, all the while humming favorite tunes of his. He carefully searched everywhere with the greatest care but behind all the bushes and trees were still just faces of the cliff, going straight up into the clouds. He didn't even find a snake hole, not to mention a real exit.

The tunes that he was humming got quieter and quieter while the heart became heavier and heavier. When he got back to where he fell asleep his legs felt weak and he had to sit down. He thought: "Miss Zhong tried to save me, but ended up giving her life away as well."

Now that he is thinking about Zhong Ling, he took out her shoes from his shirt and looked them over. Remembering back to her small and smooth feet as well as her beautiful face, he had to bring the shoes up to his lips and kiss it several times. Putting the shoes back into his shirt, he thought to himself: "Seems like I don't have a chance, and that means neither does Miss Zhong. If she was here and the two of us can spend what's left of our lives together here on the shore of this lake, that would be great. Too bad she is with that goat beard SiKong Xuan, no fun there. I wonder if she's thinking about me right now as well?" { I relate to Duan Yu on many levels, as I think what he thinks about here is exactly what I would be thinking as well }

Nothing to do, so he went over to the fruit trees to eat more fruits. Suddenly, he realized: "I have searched everywhere but here! The cliff might pull a 'Far as the edge of the world, but close to be in front of my eyes'!" He pulled the fruit tree branches aside, but shook his head in

disappointment. Behind the tree is another bare rock covered with vines, no exit whatsoever. But a closer look revealed that this rock is smooth to the point that it looks just like a copper mirror, only it is much smaller than the one by the waterfall. Duan Yu suddenly thought to himself: "Could this be the real 'No Measure Jade Cliff'?" So he pulled some of the vines off the rock. But besides being unusually smooth, there is nothing special about the rock.

Suddenly an idea popped in his head: "Nobody would ever know that I died here. No harm in carving a couple of words on this rock. Um, how about 'Duan Yu of DaLi died at this place'. Could be quite fun."

So he pulled off all the vines off the rock. Then he took off his robe, dipped it in water in the lake, and wetted the rock. Then he used some grass to brush the rock a bit. By now the rock really does look like a piece of jade.

He found a rather sharp rock on the ground and started to carve on the rock. But this rock turned out to be unusually hard. After much work, he barely carved out "Duan", but the word was carved shallow and tilted, without the slightest trace of writing technique and skill. Duan Yu threw down the sharp rock and thought to himself: "If someone sees this later, they would think that this 'Duan Yu' doesn't even know how to write his own name. If I carve these eight words, what kind of stinking legacy is that to leave behind?" Besides, his wrist was very sore.

After it got dark again, he ate some more of the sour fruits and fell asleep. He dreamt that a pair of flowery shoes was flying around in front of his eyes. The shoes were green with yellow flowers, Zhong Ling's pair. He immediately tried to grab them, but the shoes kept on flying around like a pair of butterflies, he can never seem to catch them. After a while, the shoes flew higher and higher. Duan Yu anxiously shouted: "Shoes! Please don't fly off!" This shock woke him up. Finding out that it was all a dream, he rubbed his eyes, felt his shirt to make sure that the pair of shoes are still

where they should be, and stood up. He looked up at the full moon, the silvery light shined down onto the lake making it look like a layer of silver. His eyes followed along the surface of the lake. Suddenly his whole body shook, for on the jade cliff opposite of him was an image of a person!

Needless to say, he was surprised beyond belief. Immediately he took a deep breath and shouted: "Angel! Save me! Angel, save me!" The image shook a bit, but did not reply. Duan Yu has by now calmed down a little and looked at the image more carefully. The image is very faint and hard to see clearly, but the person is wearing a robe and a scarf, obviously a man. He ran forward several steps to the lake's shore and shouted: "Angel! Save me!" The image shook somewhat and got bigger. When Duan Yu stopped, the image stopped moving as well.

After the initial puzzlement, he immediately understood: "It's my own reflection." He jumped to the left, the image on the cliff jumped to the left as well. He took a step right and so did the image. By now there is no doubt in his mind that it is his own image, but he is still puzzled: "The moon is on the southwest, how did it manage to shine my image on to the cliff?"

He turned around, only to see that on the rock which he had carved "Duan" earlier in the day there was also an image of him. Only this image is a lot smaller, but much more pronounced. He immediately understood the whole situation: "So the moon shines my reflection onto this little rock, which in turn reflects my image onto the big cliff. It is as if I was standing between two mirrors, the big mirror would reflect my image in the small mirror as well."

Now that he has thought about this, he can't help but think there is nothing special about this "Mystery of the Angel Images" that has puzzled "No Measure Sword" for decades: "There really were someone standing here practicing swords and their image got reflected onto the cliff. There used to be a man and a woman, but later on

something happened to the guy, either he left or died, and only the woman was left here. She lived here all alone and after about two years she died of loneliness." Thinking about a beautiful woman losing her love, living in this canyon all alone, and finally dying in sadness, he couldn't help but be a little depressed.

Figuring all of this out, his excitement earlier has now subsided. With nothing else to do, he started to wave his arm and legs wildly, pretending to be practicing kungfu: "Hopefully Zuo ZiMu and ShuangQing just so happens to be at the top of the cliff. When they see that 'Angel' suddenly appeared on the cliff again, they would think that the angel is trying to teach them kungfu. Then they will try hard to learn this 'kungfu' that I'm showing them so they can pass it on to posterity. Hahaha!" The more he thought about it the funnier he felt, so he started laughing heartily.

Suddenly a thought popped in his head and he stopped laughing: "These two people only practice swords in his canyon once in a while. If they don't live here, then there must be a path in and out of here. Else no matter how good their kungfu is, it is still way too much trouble to climb the cliff twice everytime they want to practice swords. Maybe once in a long while, certainly not 'often'." A ray of hope appeared to him: "I'll go and carefully look for a way out. Didn't Gan GuangHao say: 'Good things come to those with aspirations'? Hehe, he aspires to marry his Sister Ge, then I will aspire to get out of here."

So he sat down with his arm around his knees. Looking at the moon reflected in the lake, surrounded by all this quiet serenity, he started thinking: "'Good things come to those with aspirations'. That saying is true. But Confucious also said: 'Those who like are better off than those who know, those who are happy are better off than those who like.' That saying fits my style much better. Mom and dad sometimes call me 'obsessive' because I always get obsessed about stuff when I was little. Like when I was seven, I stared at that

'Eighteen Scholar' Camelia plant from dawn to dusk, even sneaking up in the middle of the night to stare at it. All I did was think about it, even while eating and learning. When the flower wilts, I cried for several days straight. Later, when I started to learn Go, it was the same, constantly forgetting about eat and sleep. All day everyday, all I did was think about how to play the game. This time dad told me to learn kungfu, just so happens I am interested in the 'Book of Changes'. Even when I'm eating, I would wonder whether the chopsticks I'm using are 'Big Haves' or 'Colleague'. I don't want to learn kungfu, was it really because I don't want to learn how to beat and kill people? Or could it possibly because I don't want to put down 'Book of Changes'? Dad said I was 'unreasonable', maybe I really was being very unreasonable. Mom knows how I am the best, so she said to dad: 'One day when this kid gets interested in kungfu, you can't even force him to stop for a minute to eat. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. If he doesn't want to learn there is nothing you can do to make him.' Ah! It is almost impossible to make me aspire to do something. Hopefully one day I'll become obsessed with kungfu, that would make my mom, dad, and uncle all very happy. I just won't beat or kill anyone once I learn it, that's all. It's not like you have to kill to learn kungfu. My uncle's kungfu is so powerful, but he is so benevolent and merciful that I don't think he killed a single person in his life. Even if he wants to kill someone, it's not like he has to do it himself."

Sitting there by the lake, deep in thought, he lost all track of time. Suddenly, he noticed faint rainbow colors reflecting off of the smooth rock by his side. Looking at it closer, he saw an image of a sword underneath the "Duan" he carved on the rock. The image of the sword was unusually clear for a reflection, he can clearly make out the handle, hand guard, and sword point. The sword is pointing

downwards, the reflection also emits a rainbowlike aura, moving and flashing around.

He wondered: "Why is there extra colors in the reflection?" He looked up to look for the moon but can't see it. Turns out that the moon has dipped below the cliff on the westside. That cliff face has a hole in it, the moonlight is shining through the hole. Inside the cave itself there were some colorful likes emitting out. Suddenly, he understood: "I get it! There's a sword hanging inside of the cave, on the sword there are many precious stones and gems. The moonlight shines on the sword and the gems making the jade reflect their image. No wonder it is so amazingly spectacular and colorful."

He thought some more: "One has to hollow out the sword body to inlay it with gems, only then can the moonlight shine through the gems and create such an image. If the sword is not hollowed out, then the moonlight can't shine through the gems. Obviously, creating this sword took a lot of work." The hole that the sword is in is about twenty meters above the ground, no way for him to go and get a closer look. Looking at it from the bottom, only the varied colored lights from the gems can be seen. But the reflection on the stone looked like a scene from a beautiful dream, as if something stolen from the gods.

Soon, the moon moved. The colors got lighter and lighter until it disappeared completely and the rock turned back to a gray color. Duan Yu thought: "That sword was probably placed there by that pair of masters. Such a steep and deep cliff, nobody in No Measure Sword would even dare to climb down to inspect the place. But if you stand on the top of the cliff, there is no way that you can see this hole and the sword. Even if No Measure Sword stood up there and stared at the cliff for another hundred years, they probably still won't know about this. Yet, even if you can get the sword, what's the big deal about that?" After thinking about it a bit more, he fell asleep.

In the middle of a dream, he suddenly jumped up: "To place a sword at that place, how much effort and work would it take? Even if you are a kungfu master, it would still be a lot of trouble. To go through so much work, there must be something behind it. Maybe there are some secrets in that hole on the cliff, maybe some secret kungfu manual is hidden there." Once his thoughts went on to kungfu, some excitement went out of his sails: "Those kind of kungfu manuals, No Measure Sword treats them like treasures, but if you put them in front of me, I wouldn't even open them up to read."

The next day, he slowly walked around the lake and enjoyed the view. This is his third day inside this canyon. He figured in four more days the "Intestine Fragmenter" would take effect, by then there really is no point in looking for a way out anymore.

He woke up at midnight that night and waited for the moon to dip west. After three or four hours, the moonlight started coming through the hole in the cliff, once again displaying all the beautiful colors upon the little smooth rock. The image of the sword on the rock is tilted toward the north, pointing at another big rock. Duan Yu's mind lit up: "Maybe there's something about this rock." He walked over to the rock and pushed. The moss on the rock felt wet and soft, yet that rock seemed to have moved a little when he pushed. He pushed even harder, now it is obvious that the rock is rocking. This rock is chest high and weigh at least a ton if not two. Logically he can never be able to move it. He felt around the bottom of the rock. Turns out this giant rock was sitting on top of a small piece of rock, but unsure whether this situation man-made or natural. His heart skipped a beat: "Something fishy is going on here!"

He placed his hands on the right side of the rock and pushed. The rock swayed out of place but then returned to its original position. There were some sounds of vines snapping coming out from underneath the rock as if the two

rocks were tied together by some vines. By now there was not enough moonlight to see clearly, so he thought: "Wait until day comes, then I'll come and figure it all out."

So he laid down beside the rock and took a little nap and when he woke up, the sun had come out. He stood up and inspected around the rock. Then he lay down and got rid of all the vines and tiny stones between the two rocks. Once again he pushed, this time the big rock slowly rotated like a door. After a quarter turn, a meter high cave appeared behind it.

In his excitement, he did not even check whether or not there are dangers inside the cave before lowering his head and entering. After more than ten steps, there is no longer any light in the cave. He held both of his hands out and felt around before every step. But the ground felt flat and smooth, as if he was walking on a stone path. It was as if the path was designed and made by human, he could not help but get even more excited about this. Only thing is that the path continued to head downwards, obviously he was going lower and lower. Suddenly, his hands came in contact with some cold, ring-like object. As soon as he touched it, the object let out a loud and clear "Dang!" He touched it once more, turned out the object was a door ring.

Where there's a door ring, there must be a door. His hands felt around, finding several door nails. In surprise and excitement he thought: "If there is someone living behind this door, wouldn't that be weird?" He found the door ring again and knocked three times. After waiting for a while, nobody came. He knocked the door ring three times more, still nobody. So he pushed the door. The door seemed to be made of iron and copper, heavy as can be, but it wasn't locked. So when he pushed, it slowly opened. He spoke up: "I am Duan Yu, please forgive me for showing up and barging in uninvited." No sound came from inside, so he stepped in.

No matter how hard he stared, he still could not see anything. The smell of mildew surrounded him, seemed like nobody has been living here for a very long time. He continued to walk forward. "Bang"! His head suddenly bumped into something. Luckily he was walking very slowly, so it didn't hurt much. He felt around with his hand, turns out it was another door. He slowly pushed this door open and some light hit his eyes.

He shut his eyes as his heart raced like crazy. Only after a bit did he slowly open his eyes and saw a round shaped room. The light was coming from the left, but it was too dim and hazy to be sunlight.

He walked toward the window that was the source of light. Suddenly a shrimp swam by outside of the window. Surprised and curious, he took several more steps towards it and saw a colorful carp casually swim by the window as well. He looked at the window closely and saw it actually is a huge piece of crystal that was imbedded into the wall. The crystal is about size of a tray and the light was coming through it.

He put his head up against the crystal and looked out. Fishes and shrimps swam about without any bounds being seen. He suddenly figured out where he was, actually below the lake, now. It must have taken a lot of effort and work to build this room so that the light from outside would come in, not to mention this tray-size crystal. After calming down some, he immediately started to worry: "Crap! I'm below the bottom of the lake now! I couldn't see a thing the entire way down, don't know how many twists and turns I took to end up here. How am I supposed to get out now?"

Turning around, he noticed that there is a stone table in the middle of the room with a stool by it. On top of the table was a copper mirror, beside the mirror were some combs and earring type of things. It looked as if this was a beautiful woman's living place. The mirror is green with rust and the

table is covered in inches of dust. Don't know how long it has been since someone been here.

Seeing this scene, he became lost in his thoughts: "A girl must have lived here many years ago. Don't know what happened to her to make her want to leave the world like this. Hmm, most likely she's the girl whose image was reflected onto the cliff." Snapping out of his trance, he looked around some more. There were mirrors all over the room and embedded into the wall as well. He did a little count, there were more than thirty mirrors in total. He thought some more: "The girl probably was an unrivaled beauty. Her partner died, so she just lived here all by herself. Only thing to do was to sit and look at herself all day everyday. Such a story, how can one not be sad?"

Walking around in the room, once in a while he would click his tongue, then other times he would let out a long sigh, only thinking about the former master of this room. After a long while, he suddenly had a thought: "Ay! I'm so busy thinking about the sadness of the former owner that I forgot about my problems." He started to talk to himself: "I, Duan Yu, am a stinking male. If I die in this place, then I could very well offend the beautiful lady. It is best to die outside by the lake. Else if others come here in the future and find my body here and mistake it for the lady's body, then isn't that... isn't that...." Before he thought about what that really is or isn't, he suddenly noticed that a mirror on the east wall was reflecting the light onto what seemed like a crack on the southwest wall. He immediately ran over and pushed hard on that piece of rock. As expected, it really was a door. As it slowly opened, it revealed an entrance. Looking into the entrance, he saw another flight of stone stairs.

In excitement, he let out a yell and danced around for a while before moving on. After walking another ten or so steps downward, he faintly saw another door in front of him. He pushed the door open. Light hit his eyes as he let out a scream: "Ai-Yo!"

In front of him was a beautiful girl dressed in formal clothing holding a sword in her hand. The point of the sword pointed right at his chest.

After a long time, the girl did not move at all. He looked at the girl closely, noticing that even though her expression looked real, she does not seem to be alive. Summoning his courage he looked her over closely again. Only now did he see that she is a statue made from white jade. This statue is the same size as an actual human. The light yellow colored silk shirt she has on were lightly moving in the wind. The most interesting feature were her pupils, they are alive with spirit and expression. All Duan Yu could say was: "So sorry, so sorry. It is so rude to stare at miss like I am." He knew it was rude, but he still could not take his eyes off of her eyes. After staring for who knows how long, he finally figured out that the eyes were made from some kind of black gem. But the more he stared the deeper her pupils seemed to become. The fact that the statue looks so very human-like was mainly because of the spirit and delicacy of its eyes.

The white jade on the statue's face has a faint sign of redness, making it even more human like. Duan Yu stepped aside to look at the statue, but noticed that her eyes followed him as if she was alive. In shock, he leaned his head to the right, the eyes of the statue still followed him. No matter where he stands, the statue's eyes are always looking at him. The expression in her eyes were even harder to figure out, seemingly love and happiness but not really, seemingly sincerely in love, yet also seemed silently depressed.

He was spellbound for a long time. With a deep bow, he said: "Dear Goddess, Duan Yu was fortunate enough to see your beauty today, I can die without no regrets now. Goddess, you have separated yourself from the world to live here by yourself, hope it wasn't too lonely." The colors from the statue's eyes changed, as if she heard what he said and was truly touched.

By now Duan Yu was completely spellbound. It's almost as if he was possessed, as if he can't ever take his eyes off the statue again. He muttered: "Don't know how I should address dear Goddess." He thought: "I should look around to see if she left her name around here."

Looking around, he saw a lot of writings on the wall to the east but he didn't really pay attention to them and immediately went back to staring at the statue. This time he noticed that the hair on the statue is actually real human hair, curled up in a bun. The hair around her temples were like a fog. By her temple was a jade hairpin. On the hairpin was two pinky sized crystals, shiny and colorful. The walls of the room were full of gems and crystals as well. On the wall on the west side, six large crystals were embedded into the walls. Beyond the crystals was the faint glow of water, making this room several times brighter than the previous room.

He stared blankly at the statue for a long time again before turning away. He noticed that the east wall has been smoothed out and several lines of words has been carved onto it. The lines were all taken from ZhuangZi (Toaist philosopher, contemporary of Mencius, a favorite of Oscar Wilde), mostly from the books of "Carefree Travels", "Principles of Nurturing", "Autumn Waters", and "Epitome of Happiness". The calligraphy was elegant and refined. The words seemed to be carved with a really sharp tool for every stroke is about half-an-inch deep. At the end was another line: "Dedicated to Dear QiuShui (Autumn Waters) from Carefree Man. No sun and moon in this cave, truly the Epitome of Happiness in the mortal world."

Duan Yu stared at these words for a while, thinking: "This 'Carefree Man' and 'Dear QiuShui' are probably the two masters that were practicing swords decades ago. And this statue is probably that 'Dear QiuShui' as well. Carefree Man was able to live with her here in this serene cave, that really is the epitome of happiness in the mortal world. Actually,

who says it's merely epitome of happiness in the mortal world, does heaven have such joys?"

His eyes moved onto the other lines on the wall: "Small and insignificant mountain, immortals dwell within, skin like ice and snow, graceful virgin, no need for foods, and shows joy in breeze." He turned to the statue and thought: "Using these words by ZhuangZi to describe Dear Goddess could not be anymore appropriate." He walked to in front of the statue and stared. Seeing her ice-like skin, he did not dare to even lift a finger and touch her. It was as if his heart was possessed. He even faintly smelled some musk like incense fragrance. From love was born respect, from respect came obsession. {ZhuangZi needs to learn to write coherently, that's what I say. Hopefully my translation was not just out there.}

After who knows how long, he suddenly blurted out: "Dear Goddess, if you are willing to say even one word to me. Then I would happily and without regret die one thousand, no, ten thousand times." Suddenly he kneeled.

When he kneeled, he noticed that there were two mats in front of the statue, seemingly placed for people to kowtow to the statue. His knees were resting on the bigger mat while there is a much smaller one just in front of the statue, seeming made for people to kowtow. So he did. Suddenly he noticed that there seemed to be words sewn onto the inside portion of the statue's shoes. He looked harder and recognized that on the right shoe was sewn: "Kowtow one thousand times, then obey my orders", and the left shoes read: "Whoso follows my instructions, will never have regrets".

These sixteen words were literally smaller than the head of a fly. The shoes were green like the lake, and the sixteen words were sewn using a thin green line, only slightly darker than the shoes. Add in the hazy and confusing lighting of the room, there is no way these words can be seen without first kowtowing followed by a careful look. Duan Yu felt that

kowtowing one thousand times was actually very natural of a thing, adding on top that he would be getting a chance to obey the statue, he really couldn't ask for anything more. As for following her instructions, he wouldn't mind jumping in boiling oil or burning seas, of course he would not regret it. So without a bit of hesitation, with his mind not all there, he started to really honestly kowtowing to the statue. All the while he counted out loud: "five, ten, fifteen, twenty...."

When he got to five hundred, his waist was sore, his bones hurt, and his forehead felt numb. But he told himself that he would not stop until he gets to one thousand no matter what. Can't even accomplish the first instructions he got from Dear Goddess, then how does he get off saying "will never have regret"? By the time he got to eight hundred, the smaller mat had been worn through, exposing something underneath. He didn't bother and still went on kowtowing one after another. When he finished, he stood up. Suddenly he felt his waist give out and fell flat on his back.

He just lied there, resting. Even though he is worn and sore all over, he still felt great in his heart for he has done something that the statue asked of him. Only after a long while did he finally, and slowly, got up. He touched where the smaller mat was worn through. It felt smooth and soft to the touch, turned out there was a silk bundle underneath. He thought: "So Dear Goddess had this planned out a long time ago. If I didn't kowtow one thousand times, the mat wouldn't have been worn through, and the treasure that she has rewarded to me wouldn't have appeared." He never cared for jade, crystals, or pearls, but since this silk bundle was given to him by Dear Goddess, he would treasure it like no other even if it's only a pile of dried up leaves. He grabbed it with his right hand, but immediately put his left hand on it as well, and held it up to his chest.

The silk bundle was about a foot long and on it were written these words: "You have already kowtowed one thousand times, meaning that you have admitted as my

subject and will listen to my command without regrets. This volume is the essence of our Carefree Sect's kungfu (Xiao Yao Pai). From this day forth, you shall, from five to seven in the morning, eleven in the evening to one in the early morning, and five in the afternoon to seven in the evening, follow and practice the instructions within. Then you can rightfully read the collection and all the kungfus of every sect in the world will be yours to use. Learn what you can and want, afterwards leave and kill all of the disciples and descendants of the Carefree Sect. If one falls through the holes, even the heavens will curse you." {Written in very fancy book Chinese, I tried to get the gist of it without breaking out with Shakespearian imitations}

His hands that were holding up the bundle could not stop shaking violently as the thought ran across his mind: "What does she mean? I don't want to learn kungfu, as for killing all of the disciples of Carefree Sect, I have even less urge to do that. But how can I not obey Dear Goddess's instructions? I have already kowtowed to her one thousand times, which means I am now a willing subject of hers. But she wants me to learn kungfu and kill, what should I do?" {As the Chinese would describe Duan Yu: Idiot Scholar!}

His mind was a mess as he thought to himself: "She tells me to learn the kungfu of the Carefree Sect and kill all the disciples of the Carefree Sect, how strange. Hm, probably her martial brothers and sisters did something horrible to her, so she wants revenge. Yet she was not able to before her death, so she wants to have a disciple to finish this wish of hers. Those people did bad things to Dear Goddess, then without a doubt they are the most evil and sinister people in the world. When Confucius said: 'Revenge with righteousness', he was talking about this kind of stuff. Dad also said that even if I don't want to kill bad people, when they meet me they would want to kill me, so if I don't know any kungfu, then all I can do is wait to be killed. There is a lot of sense in what he said." When his father was forcing

him to learn kungfu, he whipped out all kinds of philosophies and arguments of Confucius and Buddhism to say that it's not right to learn kungfu. His father's knowledge in this subject is not on par with him, so he could not argue with him. Yet at this moment, he is obsessed with the statue, so he naturally feels that there are some senses in what his father said.

He thought some more: "Dear Goddess has been gone for several decades now, don't know if there still is a Carefree Sect in this world. As the saying goes: 'Evil only begets evil'. Maybe every single one of them has already got what's coming to them and there is no need for me to kill them anymore. If there are no more disciples of Carefree Sect, then Dear Goddess's wish has come to fruition and she need not be full of hate up in heaven where she resides."

Once he thought of this, his heart relaxed and he stopped worrying. He silently prayed: "Dear Goddess, whatever instructions you leave behind, Duan Yu will obey without a question. But hopefully your powers know no bounds and the disciples of Carefree Sect have already met their ends." Nervously, he opened up the bundle. Inside was one single roll of silk scroll.

He unrolled the scroll. The first line read: "Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness" (Bei Ming Shen Gong). The handwriting was beautiful and elegant yet powerful, same as the words written on the outside of the silk bundle. After it was written:

"Zhuangzi's 'Carefree Travels' read: 'Beyond the northern boundaries is the sea of darkness, a sea of heaven. There are fishes within thousands of kilometers long, but no one knew really how long.' Also read: 'If the accumulated water is not enough, then it is no matter that the boat's big. If the water from the overturned cup is more than that can be held by the depression, then even cabbage leaves can be a boat; set the cup inside and become as one, then if the water is little then the boat is big.' In our sect's kungfu, accumulating

inner force is most important. Once inner force is strong, then all of the kungfus of all the sects are ours to use. Just like the northern darkness, able to hold all boats no matter the size, able to contain all fishes big or small. For this reason, inner force is most basic and first, while moves are last. Using the diagrams below and diligently learn inner force training and meditation."

{ Note: the phrase that said "fishes within" in Chinese is "YuYan", Wang YuYan's name is a play of this line. ZhuangZi's phrases need to make some senses, I tried to go for the literal meaning because they are supposed to be very meaningful quotes with many levels. It would be better if he had not used rare words and weird ways to say the simplest of concepts.}

Duan Yu praised: "Dear Goddess could not have made it any clearer with this passage!" He thought some more: "Since this 'Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness' is inner force kungfu, learning it should be no harm to anyone." So he unrolled some more of the scroll with his left hand. "Ah!" He suddenly screamed as his heart raced a mile a minute. In an instant he blushed to the roots of his ears and his whole body felt like it was burning up.

For on the scroll there was a drawing of a naked female, not a single strand of clothing on her body, face exactly like that of the statue's. Duan Yu felt as if one glance would be disrespect and obscene towards Dear Goddess, so he immediately rolled up the scroll. Only after a long while did he think: "Dear Goddess instructed: 'Using the diagrams below and diligently learn.' I'm only following her instructions, can't be counted as disrespect."

His hands still shaking, he unrolled the scroll again. The face of the female was smiling beautifully and sweetly. The ends of her eyebrows, the corner of her eyes, and her rosy cheeks all exuded a seductive charm. When compared to that serious expression of the jade statue, although their looks are the same, the feelings they give off are completely

different. He could almost hear his heart beating heavily as his eyes moved onto the woman's body and saw a thin green line. The line started on her left shoulders, moved horizontally until below her chin, then slanted downwards to her right breast. When he saw a slight sign of mound of her breast, his heart skipped at least five beats and he immediately shut his eyes. After a long wait, he slowly opened his eyes and looked down again. The green line passed underneath the armpits, followed her right arm, passing her wrist and finally came to a stop on her right thumb. The more he followed the line the more relaxed he became, figuring looking at Dear Goddess's arm and fingers is nothing bad. But even when just looking at her beautiful and shapely arm and legs, his heart could not help but start picking up again.

There was another green line that started at the base of the neck and went downwards, past the chest and stomach all the way until a few inches above the navel. Duan Yu dared not to look at that line very closely and turned his attention back to the green line on the arm. This time he noticed a lot of small words by the line, starting from "Cloudy Gate" all the way to "Less Merchant". He often listens in on his parents talking about kungfu, although he never really paid much attention to it, he has heard them talk about it too often. So he recognizes these small words as names of pressure points on the body.

He unrolled the scroll a bit further and read: "Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness is about using other's inner strength as my own. The sea of the Northern Darkness did not create itself. It said: 'All the rivers empties into the ocean, the ocean is because it can contain the rivers.' The vast open seas were accumulated. So 'Scripture of the Lunar Hand and Lungs' is the first lesson of the Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness" followed by detailed instructions as to how to practice this kungfu.

It concludes the section with: "When others practice inner strength, the path that they take is from Cloudy Gate to Less Merchant. But our Carefree Sect's kungfu is from Less Merchant to Cloudy Gate, if thumb comes in contact with others, then their inner force will gush into my body and be stored at Cloudy Gate as well as other pressure points. But if the opponent's inner force is stronger than mine, then the water of the sea will empty into the rivers and will lead to life threatening dangers, you have been forewarned. The other skills of our sect, has not been developed fully and are only able to weaken the opponent's inner force but cannot make it available for own use. It is as if stealing a fortune yet misplacing it, such a waste of something so precious."

Duan Yu let out a long sigh as some part of him felt that there is something not quite right with this skill. Using other's inner strength for your own use, isn't that just like stealing something precious from others? But then he also thought: "Dear Goddess could not have picked a better metaphor. Rivers empty into the sea because it is the rivers themselves doing the emptying, not because the sea is stealing the river's waters. My thinking Dear Goddess stealing from others, how disrespectful is that? Punishment is called for. Definitely called for!"

So he lifted his hand up and slapped himself once on both cheeks. The first slap on his left cheek was rather hard and very painful, so naturally he took off a lot of force on the second slap on his right cheek. He thought to himself: "Bad, evil people came to make trouble to Dear Goddess, so Dear Goddess took their inner strength for herself. That's only taking away bad, evil people's ability to do bad, evil things. Like grabbing the butcher knife away from the butcher, not killing him. How could a person such as Dear Goddess ever do a single bad thing?"

So he unrolled some more of the scroll. There were many many more drawings of naked females on the scroll, some standing and some sitting, some showing her frontside while

others show her back. Although the face remained the same, her expressions changed as well, sometimes happy and sometimes worried, sometimes full of loving tenderness while other times filled with jealous disdain; not a single expression was the same as another one. There were a total of thirty six drawings in total, every one of them have several colorful lines with pressure points clearly labeled and training instructions.

At the very end of the scroll were the words: "Minute Ice Ripple Step" (Lin Buo Wei Bu), following it were countless number of foot prints, each labeled with position names from the Book of Changes. Only a few days ago, Duan Yu was still diligently reading and studying the Book of Changes for all his worth. So upon seeing these names, his spirit and interest immediately picked up, as if he was meeting an old friend. The footprints on the scroll were densely packed and numerous, not quite sure if there are thousands of them or just hundreds. There were green lines connecting every step with another, and on the lines were arrows as well. Obviously a very complicated foot skill. At the end were written: "If suddenly meeting a strong foe, this can be used for protection as well as accumulating inner strength. Then take the foe's life."

Duan Yu thought: "Dear Goddess left this step skill, so it will no doubt be perfect and refined. If I can use it to run away when I run into a strong foe, that would be great. Then there would be no need to 'take the foe's life'."

He rolled up the scroll, clasped his hands and bowed towards it. Only then did he carefully put it in his shirt. Turning to the statue, he said: "Dear Goddess, you have instructed me to train three times a day, Duan Yu dare not disobey. From this day forth I'll be sure to be extra polite and courteous to everyone I meet, then others won't come at me. Of course, then I wouldn't need to steal their inner strength. As for this 'Minute Ice Ripple Step', I will definitely work extra hard on it. If things do not seem right, I'm out of there,

then there would be no need to steal inner strength." As for that section about "kill all disciples of the Carefree Sect", he dared not to even think about that.

Seeing that there is a door on the left, he slowly walked through it. Inside was another stone room with a stone bed. By the bed was a small wooden cradle. He stared blankly at the cradle: "Could it be possible that Dear Goddess had a baby? No way, no way! Such a beautiful girl, how could she have a baby?" Just the very thought that this "graceful as a virgin" Dear Goddess of his actually might have a baby put him on the verge of tears because of the disappointment. But his thoughts immediately turned: "Ah! That's right! This is the cradle that Dear Goddess used when she was a baby, her mom and dad made it for her. That Carefree Man and Dear QiuShui were probably her parents. Yes, that must be it." Not willing to think about this anymore and find holes in his assumption, he immediately cheered up.

There were no quilts, pillows, or clothing in the room. There is only a seven stringed zither hanging on a wall in this room. The strings are all broken. Left of the bed was a stone table, on which were carved a nineteen by nineteen square of the Go board. On the board there are about two hundred or so stones. Both sides were well placed for the match, obviously this game has not ended. Zither is here, game is not over, yet the beauty is gone. Duan Yu silently stood there in the room. Before he knew it, two streaks of tear ran down his cheeks.

Suddenly his heart turned cold: "Ai-Yo! If there is a match, then there must have been two people playing. Then Dear Goddess would most likely be that "Dear QiuShui" and she would be playing against her husband Carefree Man here. Ay! This is... This is.... Ah! I got it, this game was not played by two people. Dear Goddess was here all by herself and played against herself out of boredom and loneliness. Dear Goddess, why didn't you call out several times then? Duan Yu would have heard your voice and naturally jumped down

here to play the game with you." He walked closer and looked the game over carefully. The more he looked the more surprised he became.

The changes and turns in this game was incredible and complex, almost as if it is what a Go player would call a puzzle, traps within traps, and can lead to many different outcomes. Duan Yu has been working hard on the game of Go for years. Back when he was obsessed, he spent entire days playing against a Mr. Huo from accounting. He was born smart and in merely a year's time, he had turned a four stone handicap on himself to a three stone handicap on Mr. Huo. His skills are among the best in all of DaLi. Yet he cannot figure out how this match would turn out, it seems like the black side has the game in hand, but there is still some chance for the whites to come back. He stared for a long time as the board got blurrier and blurrier. Seeing there are two candle-holders on the table, each with half a candle remaining in it, he grabbed the fire knife and fire stone of the tray on the candle shelf and lit the candles so he could look at the match some more. He looked and thought about the match so much that he began to feel dizzy and nauseous.

He stood up and yawned. Astounded, he thought: "This match is really something. Even if I take seven or eight more days I still may not be able to figure it out. By then my life would be gone and Miss Zhong would have long been buried alive by the Divine Farmer Clan." Knowing that if he looks at the table again, who knows how long it would be before he can move on again. So he turned around and reached behind him to take ahold of a candle-holder so as to make sure that he does not lay another glance on the board. Suddenly excitement shot through his heart: "That's right! Such a complicated game, must be a puzzle laid down by Dear Goddess herself and cannot be done by two people playing. Wonderful!"

He lifted his head up and saw that there is another cave entrance at the end of the stone bed. By the entrance were written: "Blessed Reading Ground". Remembering what Dear Goddess wrote on the outside of the silk bundle, he thought: "So 'Blessed Reading Ground' is here. Dear Goddess told me that the collection of every kungfu of every sect would belong to me. I don't want to learn kungfu, so it's no big deal if I don't look through this collection but it's an order from Dear Goddess, I can't disobey." So he walked through the door with the candle.

Once he had the chance to look around, he immediately let out a long sigh and felt a lot better. Turns out that this "Blessed Reading Ground" is a huge room, several times bigger than the room outside. Inside the room was filled with rows and rows of book shelves, but there was not a single book on the shelves. He held up the candle and walked closer. Labels dotted the shelves, all of them saying things such as: "KunLun", "ShaoLin", "QingCheng of SiChuan", "PengLai of ShanDong", etc. There is even a "Duan's of DaLi" label. But under "ShaoLin" there was a note: "Missing Sutra of Changing Nerves", under "Beggar Clan" was a note: "Missing Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms", and the "Duan's of DaLi" was noted with: "Regrettably Missing One Yang Zhi, Six Meridians Divine Sword".

A long time ago these shelves were undoubtedly filled with diagrams and instructions on all of the kungfus of every sect but someone has moved the books away a long time ago. A burden that Duan Yu has been carrying in his heart lifted as he could not be any happier: "Now that the books aren't here anymore, I can't learn any of them. This doesn't count as disobeying Dear Goddess." But then he felt ashamed: "Duan Yu my good man, you are happy because you can't follow the instructions left by Dear Goddess, that is not being loyal to her. Not seeing the kungfu books, you should be sad, frustrated, and mad, not happy. Dear Goddess in heaven, please forgive me."

{Is there any doubt now that Carefree Sect is the most powerful sect and that Duan Yu, Xu Zhu, Li QiuShui, Tian Shan Tong Lao are about the most powerful characters in all of JY canon? The sweeper monk in ShaoLin is up there, but he seemed to be a freak of nature and had some prior knowledge and skill before joining ShaoLin, after all, he had only been sweeping for some forty years while he looked to be much older. Also any idea where the books are moved to? It never said in the book but I am pretty certain I know where the collection is.}

Seeing no other ways out of this "Blessed Reading Ground", he returned back to the room of the jade statue. He just barely looked at the eyes of the jade statue and became spellbound once again. He stared blankly for a long time before finally clasping his hands and bowing deeply, almost to the ground. He said: "Dear Goddess, I have important matters that I must attend to, so I have to temporarily leave. After I have saved Miss Zhong, then I will come back to be with you again."

With great effort and struggle, he walked out of the room with a candle in hand looking for another exit. There was another flight of steps heading upwards on the side that he did not notice before because as soon as he entered the room his attention fell onto the statue. He quickly walked to the end of the steps. There was a door that was barely large enough to fit through a head. He stuck his head out and took a look around. What he saw sent his heart racing out with fear.

What he saw was fearsome rapids as water roared passed him with great speed and noise, for he had come upon a river. The towering and jagged cliff stood by the bank of the river. From the looks of it he had reached the LanCang River. Excited and surprised, he slowly climbed out of the hole. Looking around him, he saw that he is more than thirty meters above the rapids. So no matter how high up the water gets, it would never reach the hole and flood the cave.

But to get to the river banks is no easy task either. So he put his hands and legs to full use as he awkwardly and pathetically started climbing up. All the while he was taking care to remember all the details of his surrounding, so as to be able to return here once he finished saving lives. He thought: "Every year from now on, I have got to spend several months in this cave to keep Dear Goddess company."

The banks of the river are covered by rocks, not even a small path could be found. He walked like this for about four kilometers when he came upon a wild peach tree. Peaches were all over this tree; he picked them and had himself a good meal. Once his stomach filled up, his spirit did as well and he walked another five kilometers when he came upon a small trail. Following this trail until it was almost dusk, he finally came upon an iron chained bridge. On a rock by the bridge were carved: "Well-Doer's Crossing".

He could not be happier, for "Well-Doer's Crossing" was one of the places that he had to pass according to Zhong Ling. He has made it onto the right path! So he grabbed the iron chains for support as he stepped onto to a plank of wood. This bridge is comprised of four iron chains, the two at the bottom have planks of wood laid on top to walk on while the two on the side are for support. As soon as he stepped onto the bridge, the chains started to shake. When he got to the middle, the shaking got even worse. Glancing down, the river was rushing by like stampeding horses below his feet. One bad step could lead to falling into the river, then no matter how good of a swimmer you are, you would not survive. He dared not to take another look down. Staring straight ahead, he nervously and shakily began to pray: "Amida Buddha! Amida Buddha!" One step at a time, he finally made it to the other end.

Only after sitting down and resting by the bridge for a while did he continue on as Zhong Ling had directed him. After walking quickly for more than an hour, he came upon a huge and dark forest. He knew he had arrived at the

entrance of "Valley of Ten Thousand Calamities", Zhong Ling's home. Walking up a little closer, he came upon nine huge pine trees lined up on the left. He counted to the fourth tree from the right. Following Zhong Ling's direction, he went around, behind the pine tree, pulling away the tall grass, and as expected, a hole appeared before him. He thought: "This 'Valley of Ten Thousand Calamities' is really well hidden indeed. Had I not been told by Miss Zhong, who could have figured out that the entrance is actually inside a pine tree?"

He walked into the hole, while keeping the grass out of the way with his left hand, his right hand found a big iron ring. With a mighty pull, he lifted up the block of wood, revealing a series of steps. He walked down several steps, turned around, used both hands to gently let the wooden block fall back into place, and continued on down the steps. After thirty or so steps the path took a turn to the right, and then after several meters it turned upwards. He thought to himself: "Building stone steps in a place like this is not easy at all but when compared with the steps at Dear Goddess's place, these come up way short." After about thirty steps upwards, he reached level ground.

In front of him was a great field of grass, at the other end was another collection of pine trees. He walked over the field of grass and saw that one of the pines had a three meters long one meter wide section pared off and a layer of white paint was painted on. On it was written: "Those with the Surname of Duan will die without exception". Nine of the words were black, the word "die", however, was blood red.

Duan Yu thought: "Wonder why the master of this valley hate us Duan's so much? Even if a guy with the surname of Duan wronged him, there are thousands of Duan's in the world, is he going to kill them all?" At this time the light is dark, these ten words looked fearsome and threatening, especially that red "die", for it looked as if it was written in blood. He thought some more: "So this is why Miss Zhong

told me not to say that my surname is Duan. She told me to bang on the sixth word three times, meaning banging on this 'Duan' word. She didn't say 'Duan' because she was afraid that I would get mad. If I have to bang on it I'll bang on it, what's the big deal? She saved my life, not only is it ok to bang on that 'Duan' word three times, even if I have to bang Duan Yu's head three times I would do it."

Noticing there is nail nailed on the tree with a small iron hammer hanging from it, he grabbed it and banged on that 'Duan' word. "Zheng"! A loud sound of metal meeting metal came when the hammer fell. Taking Duan Yu by surprise, he was momentarily startled before realizing that behind the 'Duan' was an iron board and behind that was hollow. Because the outside was painted white, he didn't notice it. He banged the hammer twice more and hung it back up.

After a while, a young girl's voice came from behind the pine: "Miss, you are back!" Her voice was full of happiness and excitement.

Duan Yu replied: "I'm here because Miss Zhong asked me to come here to meet with the master of this valley." The girl let out a surprised "Yi!" Then she asked: "You... You are an outsider? Where's miss?" Duan Yu did not see her body, but he answered: "Miss Zhong is in danger, I came here especially to report that." That girl asked anxiously: "What kind of danger?" Duan Yu answered: "She is captured and it may be life-threatening." That girl replied: "Ai-Yo! You... You... You wait here for a little bit, I'm going to report to the Madame." Duan Yu replied: "That would be great." He thought to himself: "Miss Zhong told me to see her mother first anyway."

After waiting for a while, he heard hurried footsteps come from behind the tree. The girl from before said: "Madame requests your presence." She came out from behind the tree. She was about sixteen or seventeen and is dressed like a servant. She spoke up again: "Honored guest... sir, please follow me." Duan Yu asked: "How do I address you?" The

servant girl shook her head, meaning that she can't talk anymore. Seeing fear on her face, Duan Yu dared not say anymore.

The servant girl led him through the woods, followed a small trail toward the left, and arrived in front of a house. She pushed the door open, waved her hands at Duan Yu, and stepped to the side to let him in first. Walking in, Duan Yu noticed that he has entered a small lounge with a huge candle alit on the table in the middle of the room. Even though the room is rather small, it was very elegantly decorated. After he sat down, the servant girl came with a cup: "Sir, please try the tea. Madame will be out very soon."

He took two sips of the tea when he noticed that there were four hanging scrolls on the east wall. On them were drawings of plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum (Mei Lan Zhu Ju). But they were hung in the order of: orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum, and plum. On the west wall was four scrolls of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter; but their order was wrong as well: Winter, Summer, Spring, and Autumn. He mused: "Miss Zhong's parents are both martial type of people. No surprise there if they don't know much about books, paintings, and things such as those."

Hearing sounds of jewelry clanking, a mistress had walked out from the back. She was wearing a silk shirt that was of a light green color and looked about thirty six or thirty seven years old. Seeing that her face was pretty and delicate with a faint resemblance of Zhong Ling between her eyebrows, Duan Yu knew that this was Madame Zhong. So he stood up, clasped his hands, and bowed: "Humble Duan Yu respectfully salutes to Madame." As soon as he said it he grimaced: "Ai-Yo! Why did you blurt out your real name? I was concentrating entirely on how much she looked like Zhong Ling and completely forgot about making up a fake name."

Madame Zhong was a bit taken aback, but she bowed in return nevertheless: "Many fortunes to you!" She followed

with: "You... your surname is Duan?" There was surprise in her expression. Duan Yu figured that since he had already blurted out his own name, it is too late to lie about that, so he replied: "Yes, my humble surname is Duan." Madame Zhong continued with her questions: "Don't know where your hometown is or what your father is known as?"

Duan Yu thought: "Got to tell two big lies here, or else she might guess who I am." So he replied: "I am from the city of LinAn in HeNan province. My father's given name is 'Long'." There were some traces of suspicion on Madame Zhong's face: "But you are speaking in the DaLi dialect." Duan Yu replied: "I moved to DaLi three years ago and learned the local dialect. I'm afraid it is not very good, please excuse my bad accents."

Madame Zhong took a deep breath and replied: "Very convincing dialect, not the least bit different from the locals. Please sit down."

The two of them sat down. Miss Zhong kept on looking up and down nonstop, sizing him up. All this attention made Duan Yu very uncomfortable, so he spoke up: "I ran into some troubles on the way here, causing my clothing to get torn. Your daughter is in danger, that is why I came here. Only that the news was very urgent, so I had no chance to switch into something more clean and appropriate, please forgive my rudeness."

Madame Zhong seemed to have suddenly been snapped out of a trance by his words. She anxiously asked: "What's happened to my daughter?"

Duan Yu took out the pair of shoes from his shirt and said: "Miss Zhong told me to come here with these as proof and see you." Madame Zhong took the shoes over into her hand and replied: "Thank you so much, don't know what kind of trouble my daughter has run into?" So Duan Yu told her everything that has happened from Sword Lake Palace to now, leaving out only the section regarding Dear Goddess.

Madame Zhong was quiet the entire time, but her face got darker and darker. When Duan Yu finished, she sighed and said: "As soon as she leaves the house she runs into trouble." Duan Yu replied: "All of this started because of me, Miss Zhong has no fault in this matter."

Madame Zhong looked at him and then quietly said: "Yes, that's right. Not really that surprising really, back then... back then I was the same...." Duan Yu asked: "What?" Surprised, Madame Zhong's cheeks suddenly turned red. Even though she's almost at middle age, when she gets bashful and shy she looks just like a young girl. She bashfully replied: "I... I just remembered something else." After saying that, her face turned even redder, so she immediately tried to change the subject: "I... I think this matter... is a bit... a bit troublesome."

Seeing how bashful she is, Duan Yu thought: "Of course this matter is rather troublesome, but you don't need to blush like this. Compared to you, your daughter is much more natural about these things."

Suddenly, a burly male voice came from outside the door: "Everything was going well, how did JinXi-Er get killed?"

This startled Madame Zhong, she turned and whispered: "My husband is here, he... he is always suspicious. Mr. Duan, could you go hide for a bit." Duan Yu replied: "I still should really meet his acquaintance, wouldn't it be better...." Madame Zhong covered his mouth with her left hand and grabbed his arm with her right. She pulled him to the east winged room and whispered: "Stay here, don't make a sound no matter what. My husband's temper is short and violent. Just a little bit of misunderstanding could cost you your life, then even I can't help you."

Even though she looked weak and bashful, her kungfu is first rate. This little push-pull left Duan Yu no chance to refuse as he obediently followed her into the room. But he was secretly angry with her: "I came this far to tell you about your daughter, for better or worse I'm still a guest. Making

me hide and sneak around like this, isn't that making me out to be a thief?" Madame Zhong smiled at him tenderly. As soon as Duan Yu saw the smile, all his rage disappeared as he nodded in agreement. Madame Zhong turned around, walked out, and shut the door on her way out.

Soon he heard two people walk in followed by a man calling out: "Wife!" Duan Yu peeked out from the crack between the door and the wall. He saw a man of around thirty dressed in servant clothing, face full of panic and terror; there was another tall and thin man, he was wearing black and facing outwards so Duan Yu cannot make out his face. But he could see his fan-sized hands at his side, the back of the hand was covered with veins. Duan Yu thought: "Wah! Miss Zhong's dad has got some big hands!"

Madame Zhong asked: "JinXi-Er died? How?" The servant replied: "Master send me and JinXi-Er to the north manor to welcome the guests. Master told us there would be four of them. At noon today one of them arrived, said his surname was Yue. Master instructed to call the one whose name is Yue as 'Third Sir'. But the man immediately went into a rage and shouted: 'I'm Yue Number Two, why are you calling me 'Third'? Trying to degrade me?' And with one slap he smacked JinXiEr's face so hard he fell over bleeding." Madame Zhong frowned: "Such flagrant violence! Since when did good ol' third Yue turn to second?"

Master Zhong replied: "Yue Number Three always had a weird and short temper, not to mention his deranged personality." As he replied, he turned around.

Peeking through the crack, Duan Yu was in for a shock. For his face was stretched out long like a horse. His eyes were unusually high with his huge, round nose and mouth squeezed closed to one another. So between his eyes and nose, there was a huge area of nothing. With Zhong Ling being as pretty and enchanting as she is, who could have guessed that her father would be this ugly? Duan Yu mused:

"Thank goodness she resembles her mother and not in the least bit like her father."

Master Zhong's face was full of worry and concern, but as soon as he turned around and faced his wife, his face turned happy and tender, adding a bit of appeal to that horrid face of his. He continued on: "Yue Number Three's temperament is exactly what I thought might offend and frighten you. That's why I didn't let him enter this valley. This is a small matter, no need to fret about it too much."

This is all very strange to Duan Yu: "Just a bit ago, Madame Zhong was very frightened when she heard that her husband is coming. But from how he is treating her, it seemed like he has nothing but love and respect for her."

Madame Zhong replied: "Small matter? JinXi-Er has loyally and whole heartedly served us for all these years and now is killed by that pig of a friend of yours. My heart can't take it as well as yours can." Master Zhong smiled at her in an attempt to make her feel better: "Yes, yes. You sympathize with the servants, that's because of your kind heart."

Madame Zhong asked that servant: "LaiFu-Er, what happened after that?"

LaiFu-Er answered: "When JinXi-Er was hit onto the floor, he hadn't died yet. I immediately started to yell: 'Second Sir, Second Sir! Please don't get mad at us ignorant fools.' He laughed and seemed very happy. I helped JinXi-Er up and started setting up the table for that man named Yue. He asked: 'How come Zhong... Zhong... isn't here to see me?' I replied: 'Master haven't found out about Second Sir's honored arrival, or else he would have come here much earlier to welcome you. I'm going to report this to him right now.' He nodded, then he saw that JinXi-Er was standing there shaking, so he asked: 'I just slapped you, I bet you are cursing me deep down inside aren't you?' JinXi-Er replied: 'No, no! I wouldn't dare, never ever dare!' That man said: 'Deep down inside, you are probably calling me an evil

person, so evil that I can't get any more evil, right? Hahaha.' JinXi-Er replied: 'No, no! Second Sir is a great person, not at all evil.' That man's eyebrows turned sideways and he shouted: 'You are saying I'm not evil at all?' JinXi-Er is so scared that his whole body was shaking: 'You... Second Sir... is not evil at all, not... not a trace of evilness.' That guys screamed in rage, suddenly he grabbed JinXi-Er, and snapped his neck...." His voice was shaking, obviously still shocked by what he saw.

Madame Zhong sighed and waved her hand: "You have had enough shock for one day, why don't you go and get some rest." LaiFu-Er bowed: "Yes ma'am." And walked out.

Madame Zhong shook her head and let out a long sigh: "I'm not feeling very well and would like a little bit of peace and quiet." Master Zhong replied: "Alright, I'm going to go see Yue Number Three to make sure he doesn't cause more trouble." Madame Zhong observed: "I say it's best if you call him 'Yue Number Two' instead." Master Zhong replied: "Hmph, Yue Number Three might be vicious, but I'm not scared of him at all. I'm not fussing over JinXi-Er's murder only because he is giving me a lot of face by coming all this way to help me."

Madame Zhong shook her head and said: "We have been living here in peace and quiet for ten years now. In these ten years, I have not left the valley at all, are you still not satisfied? Why must you go invite 'The Four Arch-Villains' here to make a mess of everything? You... you give me all that sweet talk all the time when in reality you don't care about me at all!" Master Zhong immediately replied: "I... Since when did I not care about you? I invited the four of them here for you." Madame Zhong humphed: "For me? Well let me thank you. If you really care about me, then listen to me and send these 'Four Arch-Villains' on their way."

Duan Yu was just feeling rather odd about this whole situation in the neighboring room: "That Yue Number Three

killed for no reason at all, he really is downright evil. Could there really be Three more people who are as evil as he is?"

Master Zhong was pacing back and forth in the hall. He spoke up with a bit of anger in his voice: "That guy named Duan disgraced me too much, if I don't avenge this wrong, then how can I, Zhong WanChou, have face to live in this world?"

Duan Yu mused: "So your name is Zhong WanChou? Ten-Thousand Enmities? This name seems rather inappropriate. As the saying goes: 'Enemies are easy to make and hard to make up to.' Holding one enmity already is not a good thing, much less ten thousand enmities. No wonder your face got pulled that long. The fact that you were able to marry such a flowery and goddess-like wife with your looks means that you have about all the luck in the world. You should change your name to 'Ten-Thousand Fortunes', Zhong WanXin."

Madame Zhong frowned and coldly replied: "Actually, the one you really hate is me and not that other person. If you really wanted to cause trouble for him, why don't you go to their house and fight it out with him? Asking for help like this, there won't be much glory in it even if you win." The veins on Zhong WanChou's forehead were all clearly visible as he shouted: "He has all kinds of dogs and sidekicks under him, you know that! I wanted to duel it out with him, but he never shows his face, what can I do?" Madame Zhong lowered her head as drops of tear quietly landed on her sleeves.

Zhong WanChou panicked: "I'm so sorry, Ah-Bao. Ah-Bao, please don't get mad, I was wrong to yell at you like that." Madame Zhong did not reply, but even more tears are appearing. Zhong WanChou scratched his head in distress: "Ah-Bao, please don't get mad at me. I couldn't control myself, I'm so sorry."

Madame Zhong quietly replied: "You still can't forget that matter no matter what. What's the point of me going on like this? Why don't you just kill me and end all of this. That

way, you don't have to keep on getting mad about this. Then just go marry another pretty wife and that'll be that."

Zhong WanChou lifted his hands up and slapped himself twice: "I was wrong, I need to be punished!"

Seeing the big hand of his hitting that long horse-like face, Duan Yu could not help but laugh at this comical scene. Even before he stopped laughing, he knew that he had really done it this time and hoped against hope that Zhong WanChou did not hear him. But Zhong WanChou immediately shouted: "Who's there?" "Peng!" Someone had kicked open the door and jumped into the room. Duan Yu suddenly felt someone grab the back of his neck and threw him into the middle of the outside room. His eyes went black from the fall as he felt as if every bone in his body had just snapped.

Zhong WanChou grabbed the back of his neck with his left hand and lifted him up: "Who are you? What are you doing in my wife's room?" Seeing Duan Yu's handsome face, he immediately became suspicious. He turned to Madame Zhong and said: "Ah-Bao, you... you... again... again...."

Madame Zhong rebuked: "'Again' this, 'again' that, 'again' what? Put him down, he is here to report an emergency." Zhong WanChou asked: "What kind of emergency?" He still had Duan Yu in midair and turned to him: "Stinking bastard, I can tell from your appearance that you are not a good person. What are you doing secretly hiding in my wife's room? Tell me, tell me now! If you even tell half a lie, I'll make sure your head end up like this table!" He brought his fist down hard onto a pear wood table, smashing half of it to bits.

After being painfully thrown on the floor, lifted up in the air, and hearing from Zhong WanChou's tone of voice that he suspect that there may be something indecent going on between him and Madame Zhong, Duan Yu got mad instead of scared. He shouted back: "My surname is Duan! If you

want to kill me then hurry it up! I don't know what kind of rubbish you are talking about!"

Zhong WanChou lifted his right fist up and shouted in rage: "Your name is Duan too? Another one named Duan, a... another one named Duan." By now, the rage in him has turned to sadness and disappointment, and tears were filling those big, rounded eyes of his.

Suddenly, Duan Yu felt very sorry for this man; figuring that he knows that his appearance does not match his wife's, and that is the reason why he gets jealous and mad for no reason whatsoever, actually a very pathetic situation for him. Unexpectedly, even though his life is in the other man's hands, he started to console him: "My surname is Duan, but I have never seen Madame Zhong before in my life. You have no need to be suspicious or sad."

Happiness returned to Zhong WanChou's face as he asked in a crackled voice: "Really? You've never seen... never seen Ah-Bao before?" Duan Yu replied: "I only came here for the first time not an hour ago." Zhong WanChou laughed sillily a couple of times and said: "Yes, of course! Ah-Bao hasn't left the valley in ten years. Ten years ago, you were only eight or nine, of course you can't... can't... cant...." But he still had Duan Yu up in the air.

A shade of red appeared on Madame Zhong's face as she spoke up: "Aren't you going to put Mr. Duan down?" Zhong WanChou immediately replied: "Yes, of course." He gently put Duan Yu down, but suddenly a look suspicion appeared on his face again: "Mr. Duan? Mr. Duan? Who... Who's your father?"

Duan Yu figured: "If I lie about it this time, it would actually seem like I have something to hide or whatever." So he said in an earnest tone: "Back then I did not tell Madame Zhong the truth when I shouldn't have. My name is Duan Yu, styled HeYu. I'm from DaLi. My father's given name is first-Zheng-then-Chun."

Zhong WanChou hadn't really figured out what "First-Zheng-then-Chun" meant when Madame Wang asked with her voice shaking: "Your father is... is Duan... Duan ZhengChun?" Duan Yu nodded: "Yes!"

Zhong WanChou screamed: "Duan ZhengChun!" His scream was so loud that it seemed like the whole world was trembling. His face was red with rage and his entire body was shaking as he yelled: "You... You are the son of that dog, Duan ZhengChun?"

Duan Yu was furious and shouted back: "How dare you insult my father?"

Zhong WanChou shouted back: "Why wouldn't I dare? Duan ZhengChun, you are a dog, a bastard, a turtle egg!"

Suddenly, Duan Yu pieced it together: "That's why he wrote outside: 'Those who enter with the surname of Duan will die.' Must be because he hates my dad so much that he hates everyone named Duan." So he calmly and coldly replied: "Master Zhong, if you have a grudge or hatred for my father, then you should get it over with once and for all in the view of the world. If you got guts then go and insult my father to his face. Insulting him behind his back is not the way of a real man. My father is in DaLi, if you want to find him then you'll find him easily. What's the point in putting up a sign in front of your house saying 'Those who enter with the surname of Duan will die'?"

Zhong WanChou's face turned many different shades in a row, as if every single word of what Duan Yu just said went straight into his heart. Rage shot out from his eyes as he looked like he was about to kill. After staying motionless for a while, he suddenly threw out two punches and smashed two chairs to pieces. He followed by throwing a kick at the wall, instantly creating a huge hole in the wall. All the while he screamed: "I'm not afraid of not being able to beat your father, I... I'm scared... scared that your father would find out that Ah-Bao is here...." When he got to here, there were faint traces of sobs in his voice. He covered his face with his

hands and screamed: "I'm a coward, I'm a coward!" Suddenly he ran out of the room, but smashing noises kept on coming from outside as he kept on running into fences, flower pots, chairs, and such.

Duan Yu was in shock for a long time, he thought: "So what if my dad knows that your wife lives here? Would he come here and kill her?" He thought that he was way too harsh with what he said, hurting Zhong WanChou like that. Regretting what he said and feeling bad about the whole situation, he turned around and saw that Madame Zhong was staring at him.

As soon as their eyes met, Madame Zhong immediately turned her eyes away. Her pale face suddenly turned a shade of pink. After a little silence, she asked in a faint voice: "Mr. Duan, how has your father been? Is he doing ok?"

Since she was inquiring about his father, Duan Yu stood up and answered very politely and formally: "Father has been very good and healthy, he is doing great."

Madame Zhong replied: "That's great. I..... I also...."

Once again, Duan Yu saw that there were little tear droplets on her long eye lashes. She didn't even finish the sentence before having to turn away to wipe away the tears with her sleeve. Duan Yu felt sorry for her and tried to console: "Auntie, even though Master Zhong has quite a temper, he has nothing but love and respect for you. The two of you have a full and beautiful marriage, this is a little disagreement, no need for Auntie to be sad like this."

Madame Zhong turned around and gave him a little smile: "At such a little age, what do you know about whether or not a marriage is full or beautiful?"

Seeing the faint traces of innocence and tenderness in her smile, Duan Yu's heart shook a bit as he was immediately reminded of Zhong Ling. He turned his eyes toward Zhong Ling's pair of flower shoes on the table and thought: "Miss Zhong is with that Goat Beard, she's probably suffering every moment of it. Got to get her out of there as soon as

possible." He spoke up: "I was just very rude to Master Zhong, could Auntie please go on my behalf and ask Master Zhong for forgiveness. And also ask him to leave and save his beloved daughter at once."

Madame Zhong replied: "My husband is busy taking care of some friends that had just arrived from very far away. It is truly very hard for him to leave right now. I'm sure you just heard as well how peculiar these friends are, killing at the slightest provocation. If we aren't polite enough to them, who knows what kind of troubles that would bring to us? Hm. The way things are now, let me go with you instead." Excited, Duan Yu replied: "If Auntie herself can go, then there is nothing more that could be asked for." Remembering something that Zhong Ling told him, he asked: "Can Auntie cure that marten, Lightning's poison?" Madame Zhong shook her head: "No, I can't." Duan Yu hesitated: "Then... this...."

Madame Zhong walked back into her room, left a brief little note, hurriedly tied a belt around her waist, and hung a sword off of it. Returning to the hall, she said: "Let's go!" And she immediately started to walk out.

Duan Yu casually and naturally picked up the flowery shoes and put it inside his shirt. Madame Zhong shook her head in silence, as if she wanted to say something. But she finally decided against it and kept on walking.

Once the two of them got outside of the hole in the tree, Madame Zhong picked up her speed. Even though she looked delicate and frail, she was walking much faster than Duan Yu.

Duan Yu still didn't feel assured: "Auntie, since you don't know how to cure, I'm afraid that Divine Farmer Clan might not let your beloved daughter off so easily."

Madame Zhong casually replied: "Who said we are asking them to let her go? Divine Farmer Clan dared to detain my daughter and threaten me, they must have grown tired of

living. I don't know how to save someone, but that doesn't mean that I don't know how to kill someone."

Duan Yu involuntarily shuddered as he felt that the disregard for human life in these last several casual sentences were as prevalent as the actions of that Yue Number Three.

Madame Zhong asked: "How many concubines does your father keep?" Duan Yu answered: "None, he doesn't keep any. My mom won't allow it." Madame Zhong asked: "Is your father really scared of your mother?" Duan Yu laughed and replied: "Not really afraid. It is mostly love and respect, much like how Master Zhong is like to Auntie." Madame Zhong replied: "Um, does your father practice kungfu everyday? In these years, has his kungfu gotten much better again?" Duan Yu replied: "Dad practices everyday. But as for how good he is, I haven't the slightest clue." Madame Zhong commented: "He hasn't slacked off on his kungfu, then I... I can set my mind to rest. How come you don't know any kungfu at all?"

Amidst the conversation, the two of them had walked another half a kilometer or so. Duan Yu was just about to answer when he heard a man screaming: "Ah-Bao! Where... Where are you going?" Duan Yu turned around and saw Zhong WanChou chasing up from behind with blinding speed.

Madame Zhong grabbed Duan Yu's arm and shouted: "Hurry up!" She started to run forward with great speed. Duan Yu's foot was off the ground as he was almost being carried by Madame Zhong. The three of them covered fifty meters or so in a flash. Although Madame Zhong's Qing Gong is not weaker than her husband, she was nevertheless dragging another person and Zhong WanChou gradually began to gain ground on her. After another fifty meters or so Duan Yu could have sworn he can feel Zhong WanChou's breath on the back of his neck. Suddenly there was a ripping

sound and he felt cold air blowing on his back. Part of the back of his shirt was torn off by Zhong WanChou.

Madame Zhong directed some inner force into her left arm and threw Duan Yu up over ten meters ahead while shouting: "Get out of here!" Her right hand had already stabbed back with the sword. Considering Zhong WanChou's kungfu, this move naturally shouldn't hit him. Besides, Madame Zhong had no intentions of injuring her husband, she just wanted to stop his pursuit. But when she struck out with her sword, she suddenly felt some slight resistance on the sword as it had stabbed her husband in the chest.

Turns out that Zhong WanChou did not dodge nor parry, but instead leaned forward and ran onto the sword.

Madame Zhong was shocked and immediately turned around. Her husband was staring at her with a furious face but with tears in his eyes. With blood gushing out where he had been stabbed, he said in a shaking voice: "Ah-Bao, you..... are finally going to leave me?"

Even though her sword missed her husband's heart, it nevertheless was several inches deep in his chest and life-threatening. In panic, Madame Zhong immediately pulled the sword out and jumped forth to press hard on his wound. But blood was gushing out so much that they were shooting out through the little spaces between her fingers.

Madame Zhong angrily said: "I didn't want to harm you, why didn't you get out of the way!"

Zhong WanChou forced a wry smile and said: "You... You... are leaving me, I... might as well die." He then broke into a coughing fit. Madame Zhong replied: "Who said I was leaving you? I'm just going out for a couple of days and then I'll be back. I'm going to save our daughter. Didn't I explain everything in that note that I left?" Master Zhong replied: "What note?" Madame Zhong scoffed: "Ay! You are just too careless for your own good." So she briefly explained Zhong Ling's capture by the Divine Farmer Clan.

Duan Yu had been scared out of his wit by what he saw. When he had recovered from the shock, he immediately tore off a piece of clothing and tried to bandage up the wound for Zhong WanChou. Suddenly, Zhong WanChou's left foot came flying in and sent him rolling along the ground. Zhong WanChou shouted: "Little bastard! I don't want to see you ever again!" He turned to Madame Zhong: "You are lying, I don't believe you. He obviously came... came to get you. This little bastard is his son... he also insulted me...." He began coughing again, causing the blood to gush out of his chest even more. He pointed at Duan Yu and shouted: "Come on! Even though I'm wounded, I'm still not afraid of your One Yang Zhi! Come on!"

Duan Yu's left cheek had hit a particularly sharp rock when he fell down. So when he pitifully got back up, half of his face was covered in blood. He replied: "I don't know One Yang Zhi. And even if I could, I wouldn't use it on you." Zhong WanChou coughed some more before angrily replying: "Little bastard, what are you pretending to be? Go... Go get your old man here!" His coughing got even worse now that he is mad.

Madame Zhong spoke up: "You are always suspicious about everything. Since you can't trust me, then I might as well die right in front of you and end it all." She picked up the sword on the ground and brought it up to her throat.

Zhong WanChou grabbed the sword out of her hand, but happiness filled his face as he said in a shaking voice: "Ah-Bao, you really weren't running off with this little bastard?"

Madame Zhong angrily replied: "He is Mr. Duan, would you stop with the little bastard, big bastard talk? I was going with Mr. Duan to get rid of Divine Farmer Clan and save our daughter." Hearing that she wasn't leaving him, Zhong WanChou was happy beyond belief, add that on top the slightly angry expression on her face, and immediately his love and affection returned: "If that's the case, then it's all my fault. But... But since I have already chased all this way,

why didn't you just stop and tell me all this?" Madame Zhong's face turned just a little redder as she replied: "I didn't want you to see Mr. Duan again." Zhong WanChou's suspicion was suddenly aroused again: "This little.... This Mr. Duan isn't your son is he?"

Angry and embarrassed, Madame Zhong replied: "Pei! Why are you just talking nonsense? First he's my lover, now he's my son. To tell you the truth, he's my old man, your father-in-law." After saying that, she laughed despite of herself.

Zhong WanChou was taken aback for a moment before he realized that his wife was joking. That sent him into a wild laughter, which caused the blood to flow out even faster out of his wound.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Madame Zhong said: "What... What should I do?" This made Zhong WanChou even happier as he put his arm around her waist and said: "Ah-Bao, with you worrying so much about me. Even if I die right now I would not feel wronged." Madame Zhong's cheeks were burning red as she lightly pushed him away: "Mr. Duan is here, how can you still act like that?" Zhong WanChou heartily laughed. After several laughs, he coughed several times.

Seeing the pale and exhausted expression on her husband's face, Madame Zhong was deeply worried and said: "I can't go save Ling-Er now, she caused the trouble herself, she'll just have to see what fate she is dealt." She helped her husband up and then turned to Duan Yu: "Mr. Duan, go tell SiKong Xuan: my husband is that 'Divine Horse King' Zhong WanChou who shocked the martial world years ago. I'm Chan BaoBao and have a rather unpleasant nickname: 'Pretty Medicine Fork'. If he dares to even touch a single strand of hair on our daughter, remind him that the two of us are tough and merciless." For every sentence she said, Zhong WanChou would add after it a "Yes, that's right!"

Duan Yu had figured that Zhong WanChou could not go himself and that Madame Zhong cannot leave her husband to save her daughter after witnessing what he saw. Just using Divine Horse King Zhong WanChou and Pretty Medicine Fork Chan BaoBao's name probably could not scare SiKong Xuan into submission. So it seems that the "Intestine Fragmenter" in his belly would not be cured. He figured: "Since things are like this, then there is no point and nothing good will come in saying anymore." So he replied: "Alright, I will go and tell them immediately."

Seeing how he just naturally and suavely got up to leave as soon as he said he would, Madame Zhong was once again reminded of someone in her mind, she cried out: "Mr. Duan, I have one more sentence to say to you." She gently put her husband down and run up to Duan Yu. She took an object out of her shirt, stuffed it in Duan Yu's hand, and whispered: "Take this to your father and ask him to please save our daughter."

Duan Yu replied: "If my dad would come out, then of course Miss Zhong would be saved. But the journey to DaLi is not a short one, I'm afraid that I might not make it in time." Madame Zhong said: "Then I'll lend you a good horse, please wait here for a bit. Please don't forget to tell your dad exactly: "'Please save our daughter'." She did not wait for Duan Yu to reply before running to her husband's side, helping him up, and starting to walk back the way they came.

Duan Yu held his hand up and saw that what Madame Zhong stuffed in his hand was a delicately made golden box. He opened it and saw that there was a piece of paper inside. The paper was faintly yellow, obviously very old, with several faint traces of spilled blood on it. On it was written: "Girl born between one and three in the morning, February 5th, year of Geng-Shen". The calligraphy was soft and weak, obviously written by a female, and the style was rather lacking, other than that there was nothing in the box. Duan

Yu wondered: "Who's birth certificate is this? Madame Zhong wants me to give this to my dad, what for? The year of Geng-Shen, Geng-Shen...." He did a bit of counting backwards with his fingers, that was exactly sixteen years ago, ".... Could it be Miss Zhong's? Madame Zhong wants to marry her daughter off to me so that my dad would go save his daughter-in-law?"

Deep in his thoughts, he was suddenly interrupted by a man's voice: "Mr. Duan!"

Chapter 3: Fast Horse and Faint Fragrance

Fan translation by Moinllieon ([send email](#)) [Second Edition]
wuxiapedia.com / www.spcnet.tv

Duan Yu turned around and saw a man dressed in servant clothing walking quickly towards him, turned to be the LaiFu-Er that he saw a bit ago on the other side of the wall. He walked up closer and bowed before speaking: "LaiFu-Er humbly came following orders from the Madame to go with Sir to borrow the horse." Duan Yu nodded: "Alright, sorry to trouble you."

So LaiFu-Er walked in front leading the way as they made their way through the pine tree woods, turned north onto another small path, and after walking for another three or four kilometers, they arrived in front of a big house. LaiFu-Er went up, took the ring on the door in hand, gently knocked twice, paused, then knocked four times, and finally he knocked three more times. That door cracked open just a little. LaiFu-Er stood outside the door and whispered with the doorman for a while. By now it was dark, Duan Yu looked up at the scattered stars in the sky; suddenly his mind wandered to that cave and the Dear Goddess that lived in it.

Suddenly there came from inside the door a long and loud horse neigh, Duan Yu could not help but comment: "Excellent horse! Excellent indeed!" The door opened and a horse head poked out, the pair of horse eyes glowed in the dark as they looked around, obviously this was not an usual horse; with a couple more hoof beats, the black horse had walked out of the door. The hoof beats were landing very lightly on the ground, the horse was thin and slight but its legs were long as it had an air of proud arrogance. A little maid with her hair down was leading the horse out, in the

darkness Duan Yu could not see her face, but she seemed to be around fourteen or fifteen.

LaiFu-Er spoke up: "Mr. Duan, Madame was worried that you might not get to DaLi in time, so we came here to borrow a horse from the Young Miss here. This horse's leg power is truly amazing, this Young Miss here is a good friend with our Young Miss as well, only upon hearing that Sir was going to save Young Miss did she let us borrow this horse, this really is giving us a tremendous amount of face." Duan Yu had seen quite a lot of great horses, he only needed to hear its neigh to know that this horse was truly one in a million, so he replied: "Many thanks!" He reached over to grab the reins. The little maid tenderly stroked the fur and mane of the horse while gently saying: "Now Black Rose, Young Miss is letting this young Sir borrow you to ride for a bit, so you better be good and come back soon." The black horse turned its head and gently rubbed against her arm, showing a great amount of affection. The maid handed the reins over to Duan Yu and admonished: "Don't use whips on this horse, the better you treat it, the faster it'll run."

Duan Yu replied: "Alright!" He thought: "The horse's name is Black Rose, so it's got to be a mare." So he said: "Miss Black Rose, please forgive me for any rudeness of mine." He bowed towards the horse as he said this. The maid let out a little laugh and said: "Quite an interesting guy you are that's for sure. Hey, careful, don't fall down." Duan Yu nimbly hopped onto the horse's back and turned to the maid: "Many thanks to the Young Miss of the house!" The maid replied with a laugh: "What? No thanks for me?" Duan Yu cupped his fist and said: "Many thanks to my sweet sister. When I return I'll bring some delicious preserved fruits for you." The maid replied: "No need for the fruits. Just be careful and don't hurt the horse."

LaiFu-Er instructed: "Ride north from here and you will find the highway leading to DaLi. Sir, please take care."

Duan Yu waved his hand, the horse started moving her legs, after a few gallops he was already some fifty meters away.

Black Rose did not need any urging as she was flying in the night, Duan Yu felt as if the trees at his sides were backing up as they sped past him; what's more amazing was that the back of the horse was unusually steady without even the slightest of dips. He thought: "At this rate, I am sure to reach DaLi by tomorrow afternoon."

In the amount of time to boil some tea, they had already traveled more than five kilometers; the cool breeze blew through the night, bringing smells of grass and trees to Duan Yu's face. Duan Yu mused: "Galloping in the night, one of the joys of life indeed." But suddenly there came a shout from ahead: "Bitch, stop!" A flash of blade being swung shot through the darkness as a sabre came flying down. But the black horse was so fast that the sabre missed by several meters. Duan Yu turned his head and saw two huge men, one with a sabre in hand while another had a spear, chasing after him. The two of them were cursing profusely at him: "Bitch! Dressing up like a man! Think you can fool your old man?" In a blink of an eye, the horse had left them way behind. Although the two men were fast, soon even their cursing could not be heard anymore.

Duan Yu thought: "Those two ruffians were calling me 'bitch', and saying that I'm 'dressing up like a man', what for? Oh I get it, they are looking for Black Rose's owner, so they saw the horse and didn't bother with checking out the rider, such rudeness." After galloping for a few more kilometers, a thought suddenly occurred to him: "Ai-Yo, this is not good! I was lucky that this horse was fast to be able to escape their ambush. Seems like that these two men's kungfu aren't that shabby, if the young miss that lent me this horse came walking out without any precaution, she might be ambushed. I have to go back and report this!" So he immediately pulled the horse to a stop and said: "Black Rose, someone wants to harm your master, we have to go

back and report that, to tell her to be careful and not leave the house."

So he turned the horse around and started on the way back, when getting close to where the two men ambushed him, he urged: "Faster, faster!" Black Rose seemed to have understood him as she really did pick up her speed. But the two men were gone. Duan Yu became even more worried: "Maybe the two of them went to attack that young miss in the house, that would be even worse!" So he kept on urging "Faster", it was as if Black Rose's hooves were not even touching the ground anymore as they went flying back the way they came.

When they arrived back at the house, a pair of sticks suddenly popped out of the ground and swung towards the horse's legs. Black Rose didn't wait for Duan Yu to react and jumped over them herself, she then kicked her hind legs back and knocked down one of the men with a stick.

In one flurry, Black Rose had arrived in front of the house, four or five men jumped out from the darkness and grabbed onto Black Rose's reins. Duan Yu felt something gripping his right arm as he was dragged down off the horse. Someone demanded: "Boy, what are you doing here? Where do you think you are going?"

Duan Yu was grumbling to himself: "This can't be good, not good at all, the entire house is surrounded, I wonder if they have done anything to the owner?" Feeling the grip on his right arm tighten like a vise, so much so that the right side of his body was numb, he replied: "I'm here to see the master of this place, what do you think you are doing, acting this rudely?" Another voice, which was old and raspy, observed: "This little bastard was riding that bitch's black horse, he must be a friend of that bitch, let him go in and we can wipe all of them out in one strike." Duan Yu's mind was a mess as he couldn't calm down: "This is called asking for it. Well, since it's already like this, only thing to do is to go in and hope for the best." Feeling the grip on his right arm

loosen, he adjusted his clothing a bit and walked right through the door.

He walked through a yard with roses planted on each side of the stone path that caused the whole place to permeate with a delicious fragrance; the stone path twisted and turned through a round door as Duan Yu followed the path, seeing that there were men placed here and there all along the path for an ambush. Suddenly he heard a light cough from up above, he looked up and saw that there were seven or eight men standing on top of the wall as well, the weapons in their hands flashed brilliantly in the night; overwhelmed, he thought: "There can't be that many men in the house, yet so many enemies showed up, are they going to kill everyone for real?" The men were staring at him murderously through the darkness, some of them had their hands on their weapons, making them even more threatening. Duan Yu could only try to stay calm and force himself to smile back. The stone path led to a huge parlor that had lamp light shining through the rows of windows. He walked up to it and spoke in a loud voice: "I humbly request an audience with the master of this place."

A very raspy voice shouted back: "Who the hell is it? Get in here now!"

Duan Yu was feeling a bit offended as he pushed open the door and walked in; he saw around seventeen or eighteen people in the parlor, some standing, some sitting. In the middle sat a girl wearing black, her back was facing towards the door so her face could not be seen, her body look slender and elegant, her shiny dark black hair was done in the style of a girl. Two old women sat in the grand chair on the east side, they had nothing in their hands; the rest of the men and women present all had weapons in hand. A person was lying in front of the old woman that sat closer to the door, blood was pouring out of his forehead, obviously dead; this person happens to be the person that led Duan Yu here for the horse, LaiFu-Er. Duan Yu thought how polite and

respectful this person treated himself and his terrible fate of being suddenly killed here, which was partly caused by himself, he felt terrible.

The old woman that sat farther from the door was short in stature and had a head of white hair, she demanded in a raspy voice: "Hey boy! What are you doing here?"

When Duan Yu pushed open the door and stepped in, he had already made up his mind: "Since I'm in such mortal danger, if I'm able to escape then it really is fortune of fortunes, but seeing the murderous looks on these people, it would not help a bit if I tell them what they want to hear." Now he was even more determined after seeing LaiFu-Er's body on the floor, so he held his head up high and said: "Gramps had only lived a couple more years, why are you being so rude and going 'boy this' or 'boy that' all the time?"

That old woman's face was short and wide, filled with wrinkles, and her white color eye brows were slanting downwards; the pair of eyes that she had narrowed to a crack suddenly looked murderous as she sized up Duan Yu a couple of times. The old woman that sat closer to the door shouted back: "Stinking boy, how dare you! Grandma Rui was actually addressing you herself, that's giving you a lot of face already! Do you have any idea who this gramps is? You can't see Mount Tai if it was right in front of you!" This old woman was very fat, her belly stuck out as if she was seven or eight months pregnant, only some of her hair was white and her face was ugly and ferocious, when she talked her voice was rougher than most men; she had a wide-bladed dagger on each side of her hips, one of the daggers was covered with blood; obviously she was the one that killed LaiFu-Er.

When Duan Yu saw this, he became even angrier as he replied loudly: "From your accent I can see you are from around here, and yet you dared to cause trouble and kill here in DaLi, you have to know that even though DaLi is a small country, it still has laws. As for who Grandma Rui is, I

have no clue, but even if she's the Queen Mom of the Great Song she can't come here to DaLi and kill as she pleases!"

The fat old woman was furious, she jumped up out of her chair and with a flick of her wrist, a dagger had appeared in each of her hands. She shouted: "Well I just happen to want to kill you, what can you do about it? There isn't a single decent person in all of DaLi, they should all be killed." Duan Yu yawned and snickered: "Such wonderful logic, funny, very funny!" The old woman took a step forward and the dagger in her left hand came chopping down towards his forehead.

"Dang"! An iron crutch came out of nowhere and parried the dagger away; unexpectedly, it came from Grandma Rui. She said in a low voice: "Be patient Grandma Ping, let's find out what we can and then we can still kill him!" She put her iron crutch back on the side of the chair and turned towards Duan Yu: "Who are you?" Duan Yu replied: "I am a citizen of DaLi. This fat gramps here said that everyone in DaLi should die, then I guess I'm someone who should die as well." Grandma Ping was still furious: "Call me Grandma Ping, what's with all those fat comments?" Duan Yu snickered: "Why don't you take a look at your tummy, is it fat or not?"

Grandma Ping was livid: "You little bastard!" She swung her dagger hard twice at the air in front of her. The sight and sound of those two swings made Duan Yu suddenly break out in a cold sweat in fear, but he was still able to make his face look like he didn't care.

Grandma Rui observed: "You look rather clean and refined, are you a friend of this little bitch?" She pointed at the back of the girl in back. Duan Yu replied: "I have never seen this young miss before in my life. But Grandma Rui, I urge you to be a bit more tactful in your choice of words and not just come out cursing everyone. This young miss is showing quite a lot of character not to make a fuss over this with you, but you don't come out very well anyway." Grandma Rui replied: "Pei! How dare you tell me how to

behave! If you never met this bitch before, then what are you doing here?"

Duan Yu replied: "I'm here to give her a message." Grandma Rui asked: "What message?" Duan Yu sighed: "I'm a step too late, so the message really doesn't matter anymore." Grandma Rui demanded severely: "What message? Tell me." Duan Yu replied: "When I see the master of this place, I would automatically say it, why would I tell you?" Grandma Rui faintly sneered for a while before responding: "You want to say it, then go ahead and say it. A little bit more hesitation, then both of you are going off to the nether world." Duan Yu asked: "Who is the master? I have to thank the master for letting me borrow the horse."

Just as he finished saying this, everyone in the parlor's eyes turned towards the girl in black sitting in the middle.

Duan Yu was quite surprised: "Can she be the master of this place? She's a girl and is surrounded by so many powerful enemies, this is not looking good."

The girl slowly spoke up: "Letting you borrow the horse was giving someone else face, no need for you to thank me. What are you doing back here and not off to save her?" Even though she's talking, she did not turn around and her face was still facing inward.

Duan Yu replied: "I was riding on Black Rose when I was ambushed on the path by someone who mistook me for Miss. They were calling out some rude names as well. I felt that this does not seem right and had to come back and give a message to Miss."

The girl asked: "What message?" Her voice was clear and beautiful, but her tone of voice was cold without the slightest hint of warmth and unspeakably uncomfortable to the ear. As if she did not care for anything in the world, as if she was filled with hatred for everyone in the world, as if she hoped to be able to kill everyone in the world.

Feeling that she was being rather impolite, Duan Yu wasn't feeling all that great inside. But figuring that since

she had fallen into enemy hands and her life hung in the balance, he forgave her for acting a little out of character. He actually felt a bit of sympathy for her as he gently replied: "Those two low-lives intended to harm Miss, I was able to avoid their ambush because of the speed of my ride. But I thought Miss might not know that you have enemies coming, so I came running back to report this and urge Miss to leave as soon as possible to avoid the danger. But alas, I was still too late, they are already here."

The girl sneered: "What are you trying to get on my good side and pretending to care?" This made Duan Yu quite angry as he replied much louder than he needed to: "I have never seen Miss before in my life. But how could I not get involved when I know that Miss is in danger? How could Miss say 'trying to get on my good side'?" The girl asked: "Do you know who I am?" Duan Yu replied: "Not at all."

The girl commented: "I heard from LaiFu-Er that even though you don't know any kungfu, you actually dared to go up against and argue with Master of the Valley of Ten Thousand Calamities to his face. You got some guts, now that you are involved in this mess, what do you plan to do?" Duan Yu was taken aback for a moment before answering: "I had planned to leave as soon as I report this matter to Miss and head straight home." When he got to here, he sighed: "But it looks like Miss is in grave danger, and I'm not much better off either. How did Miss become enemy with this lot anyway?"

The girl in black let out a snicker and said: "What right do you have to ask me?" Duan Yu was taken aback for a moment again and replied: "I shouldn't ask about other people's private business. Alright, I have told you what I wanted, so I don't owe you anything either." The girl in black asked: "You didn't think that you were going to lose your life here did you? Are you regretting coming back?" Noticing that she was obviously mocking him, Duan Yu replied, again, much louder than he needed to: "A real man only hopes to

do the right thing in terms of honor and friendship and takes consequences as they come, what's there to regret about?"

The girl in black humphed and replied: "With what little that you can do, you still call yourself a real man?" Duan Yu rebuked: "The measure of a man is not in his kungfu skill. If one's kungfu is the best in the world, but his actions are despicable, then he does not deserve to be call a real man either." The girl in black sneered: "Hehe, you saw something you didn't like and came back to tell me, turns out you were trying to be a real man. Too bad in a bit when you are chopped to pieces by sabres, you probably won't look too much like a real man."

Grandma Ping suddenly cut in: "Little bitch, quit wasting time! Get up and fight!" She banged her daggers together, creating a piercing hum.

The girl in black coldly replied: "You have already lived for so long, what's waiting a couple more minutes to die? How come that old bitch Wang from SuZhou doesn't come and kill me herself if she wanted to but instead send you servants?"

Grandma Rui replied: "Even seeing a noble person like our Madame is out of the question for a little bitch like you. If you know what's good for you, then just go with us and kowtow a couple of times to Madame. Maybe Madame will be merciful and let you keep your life. Don't even think about trying to escape this time, you can't. Where's your master?" The girl in black suddenly shrieked: "My master is behind you!"

Grandma Rui, Grandma Ping, and the rest of the people were all shocked as all of them spun around. There was nobody there.

Seeing that everyone of them fell of it, Duan Yu busted out laughing. Grandma Ping angrily demanded: "What are you laughing at?" Duan Yu managed to get out in between his laughs: "Funny, funny!" Grandma Ping asked further: "What's funny?" Duan Yu replied: "Haha, so funny!"

Grandma Ping asked again: "What's so funny?" Duan Yu was still laughing: "Hehe, so funny, so very funny!" Grandma Ping asked yet again: "What's so very funny?" Grandma Rui cut in: "Grandma Ping, just ignore this little bastard!" Turning toward the girl in black, she continued: "Miss, you have ran from just south of the Yangtze all the way to DaLi, and we have chased you all the way here as well. Do you think we can possibly stop this? Even if every single one of us dies by your hand, we still have to somehow bring you back there. Go ahead if you please!"

From her tone of voice, Duan Yu detected that Grandma Rui was rather scared of this girl in black, he was secretly shocked. Looking around at the other seventeen or eighteen people in the parlor, he noticed that all of them were holding their weapons tightly and looking at her in anger, yet none of them dared to make a move. Grandma Ping was clutching her twin daggers tightly and had walked almost up to the girl's back on a few occasions before hastily retreating.

The girl in black spoke up: "Ay! Messenger Boy, all these people are fighting me, any ideas what I should do?" Duan Yu thought out loud: "Um, Black Rose is right outside, if you can somehow break through them, you can escape riding on the horse. That horse is amazingly fast, there is no way they can catch up to you." The girl in black asked: "Then how about yourself?" Duan Yu replied seriously: "I don't have anything to do with them, no gratitude nor revenge is owed between us; you never know, maybe they would leave me alone."

The girl in black snickered and said: "If they are that reasonable, then they wouldn't gang up on me like this. Your life is gone; if I can escape, got any last wishes that you would like for me to do for you?"

With a tinge of pain in his heart, Duan Yu said: "Your good friend, Miss Zhong, is captured by Divine Farmer Clan in No Measure Mountain. Her mother gave me this box to give to my father and ask him to save her. If... If... Miss can escape,

then could you do this for me? I would be indescribably grateful." As he was talking, he walked up and held out the delicate box. When he got to about one meter behind her, he was suddenly hit with a sweet fragrance, very much like orchid but not quite and similiar musk but not. Although the fragrance wasn't strong, it was refreshing and sweet, he couldn't help but be dazed when he smelled it.

The girl in black still didn't turn around and asked: "Zhong Ling is very pretty, do you have feelings for her?" Duan Yu immediately replied: "No, no. Miss Zhong is so young and so innocent and pure. How... how I can get that kind of ideas?" The girl in black reached back with her left arm and took the box out of his hand. Duan Yu noticed that she was wearing a very thin black glove so that not a single bit of her skin was exposed. He added: "My father lives in the city of DaLi, you only need...." The girl cut him off: "We can talk about this later." Putting the box inside her shirt, she suddenly said: "The old man named Zhu, get the hell out of my sight!" An old man with white beard asked in a trembling voice: "What did you say?" The girl replied: "Get out of the parlor now, I don't want to kill you today." The old man pointed his sword at her and shouted: "What the hell are you saying?" His voice was still trembling, although it was unclear if it was caused by anger or by fear.

The girl in black replied: "You are not a servant of that Wang bitch, you just got dragged along by those two grandmas. This entire trip you have been pretty good to me, those guys kept on trying to take down my mask but you kept on getting in the way. Hmph, you can actually be considered as not deserving to die. So get the hell out of my sight!" The old man's face turned to a dirt color as the point of the sword in his hand slowly began to point lower and lower.

Duan Yu cut in: "Miss, if you want him to leave, then just tell him so, no need to be so impolite. You might anger this gentleman named Zhu." But to his surprise, the old man

with the surname of Zhu hesitated for a bit and then looked frightened for a while before he suddenly dropped his sword, turned around, and actually began to run off with his hands covering his face. Just as he was about to push the parlor door open, Grandma Ping flicked her right hand, and a dagger came flying out, hitting him smack in the middle of his back. The old man fell down and crawl several of meters more on the ground before he finally stopped moving.

Furious, Duan Yu shouted: "Hey, fat grandma, this old gentleman was one of you guys! Why did you have to do that to him?"

Grandma Ping took out another dagger from her waist with her right hand and, with a dagger in both hands, stared at the girl in black, as if she didn't hear what Duan Yu said at all. All the people in that parlor had took a couple of steps forward as they were all prepared to pounce at the slightest provocation or command.

Seeing such a scene, Duan Yu was overwhelmed with indignation as he shouted: "All of you guys, what do you think you are doing ganging up against a completely unarmed girl?" He charged up a few steps, got between the girl and the others, and shouted: "Let's see which one of you dares to do something now!" Even though he didn't know a lick of kungfu, this type of righteousness still carried quite a mighty and intimidating air with it.

Seeing how fearless he was, Grandma Rui couldn't help but wonder if this young man wasn't pretending that he didn't know any kungfu then he must have someone very powerful behind him. She was following her orders when she came all the way from just south of the Yangtze to here in DaLi to capture this girl in black, so she was unfamiliar with local customs or people and did not want to make any enemies. So she actually sounded very polite when she said: "Why must Sir meddle in this matter?" Duan Yu replied: "That's right, I won't allow you people to unfairly gang up on her." Grandma Rui asked: "What sect or clan does Sir belong

to? And what is sir's relationship with this little bitch? Who's order are you following, coming here and getting in the middle of all this?"

Duan Yu shook his head: "I have never met this girl before. But everything in this world still has to be measured in terms of reason. I urge everyone to stop all this nonsense when the time comes. All these people ganging up against one single girl isn't all that glorious is it?" He then whispered: "Run Miss! I'll try and stop them somehow."

The girl in black whispered back: "You are giving your life away for me, sure you won't regret it?" Duan Yu replied: "No regrets of any kind." The girl asked again: "Aren't you scared to die?" Duan Yu sighed: "Of course I'm scared, but... but...."

The girl in black suddenly yelled: "You're not even strong enough to kill a chicken, why pretend to be a hero?" She suddenly flicked her right arm as two colorful strips of cloth shot out and grabbed a hold Duan Yu's legs. Suddenly seeing her attacking Duan Yu shocked Grandma Rui, Grandma Ping, and everyone else present. While they were still recovering from their shock, the girl in black flicked her left arm repeatedly. "Dong", "Feng", "Bang" was all Duan Yu could hear as he thought he saw people fall down and the reflections off of blades flashed into his eyes before all the candle-light in the parlor was put out and darkness descended. Then he felt himself flying.

All this change came too fast as he could not make out where he was. But all around him was screams: "Don't let her get away!" "Watch out for her poison arrows!" "Let loose your daggers! Let loose your daggers!" What followed was sounds of metal clanking before his body suddenly took off again and there were hoof beats. He was on the back of a horse, but his arms and legs were tied up and he couldn't move. There was someone leaning up against his back. There was a faint fragrance in the air, the fragrance that belonged to the girl in black. The hoof beats were light and steady as the sounds of shouting got farther and farther

away. Black Rose was entirely black and the girl was wearing only black, so they just disappeared in the darkness of the night; the only sign of them was the faint fragrance permeating through the air, adding a feel of mystery to them.

After Black Rose ran for a while, the shouting could not be heard anymore. Only then did Duan Yu spoke up: "Miss, I didn't expect you to be so amazing, can I get off now?" The girl humphed but did not reply. Duan Yu's arms and legs were bounded very tightly and it felt as if they were getting tighter with every step Black Rose takes, causing more and more pain. On top of that his foot was above his head as he was lying sideways on the horse, making him feeling dazed and very uncomfortable. He had to speak up again: "Miss, let me down!"

"Pa"! The girl suddenly slapped him hard on his cheek. Coldly, she commanded: "Shut up! Do not talk unless spoken to!" In anger, Duan Yu asked: "Why?" "Pa, Pa!" He was slapped twice more, this time even harder than the first one, so much so that his right ear was ringing.

Duan Yu shouted: "How dare you hit people for no reason! Put me down, I don't want to be with you!" Suddenly his body flew out again and smack onto the ground. But his arms and legs were still tied and the other end was still in the girl's hands. Duan Yu was being pulled along the ground by Black Rose.

The girl in black quietly give a little command and Black Rose slowed down a bit. She then asked: "Give up? Willing to obey my commands now?"

Duan Yu shouted back: "No! No way! Never! Just a little bit ago I was about to die and I wasn't even afraid then. This little torture from you, what have I... I...." He was going to say "what have I got to be scared of?" But right at that time he just happened to be pulled into two little dirt mounds on the road; after those two little mounds, there was no way he could have finished his sentence.

The girl in black mocked: "How about now"? She gave the piece of cloth a pull and pulled him onto the horse again. Finally, Duan Yu was able to say: "What have I got to be scared of? Nothing! I don't like being pulled around by you!" The girl humphed and replied: "How dare you talk in front of me? If I want to torture you, then it would be to the point where you don't know if you are alive or dead anymore, nothing like this weak stuff!" She flicked her left arm and threw him back onto the ground again.

Furious, Duan Yu thought to himself: "So it turns out there was a good reason that those people were calling you 'little bitch'!" He shouted at her: "If you don't stop now, then I'm going to start saying some unpleasant stuff!" The girl asked: "If you dare then go ahead. I have been cursed at too many times in my life to care." Duan Yu noticed a hint of sadness in what she said, so he didn't have the heart to make himself utter the words 'little bitch' which were on the tip of his tongue.

After a little bit of waiting, the girl in black, noticing that he hadn't said anything, spoke up: "Hmph! Figured you wouldn't dare to curse at me!"

Duan Yu replied: "I pitied you and couldn't bring myself to curse at you, not like I was afraid or anything!"

The girl gave a little command to urge the horse to run faster and Black Rose began to gallop. Now Duan Yu was in for it, his face, arms, and legs were just covered with blood from cuts and scratches from rocks and stones on the path by the time the girl shouted: "Give up?" Duan Yu shouted at the top of his lungs: "You evil witch!" The girl shouted back: "I have been a witch all along, no need for you to remind me, didn't you know?"

Duan Yu yelled back: "I... I... was so... was so... so nice towards you...." But suddenly his hand ran smack into a rock that was jutting out of the ground and he fainted. After who knows how much time, he suddenly felt coolness around his head, causing him to wake up and swallow a mouthful of

water. He immediately closed his mouth but couldn't help but cough from the water, causing even more water to enter his mouth and nose. Turns out that he was still being pulled by the horse, only that the girl noticed that he had fainted and dragged him across a small creek so that the cold water could wake him up. Luckily this creek was rather narrow and soon he was out of it. Duan Yu was in torture, his cloths were soaked through, the water he swallowed was making him feel bloated, and then his body was covered with cuts. The girl spoke up: "Give up?" Duan Yu thought to himself: "There are actually this kind of unreasonable woman in the world? It must be destined that I, Duan Yu, would suffer in her hands; if that's the case, then there is really no need to say anything more to her." The girl asked several more time: "Give up? Had enough yet?" Duan Yu did not reply at all and just pretended as if he didn't hear her. The girl began losing her patience: "Are you deaf? Why aren't you answering me?" Duan Yu still did not reply. The girl pulled her horse to a stop and turned around to see if he was conscious. By now dawn was drawing near and there were hints of light from the east. But her eyes were huge as they stared at him in anger: "Oh! So you are conscious but were pretending to be dead! Well if we are going to fight then let's fight fair and square and see who is more powerful!" She jumped down off her horse and, with a light little flick, grabbed a small branch off a tree and smacked Duan Yu's face with it.

This was the first time Duan Yu was face to face with her. Her face was entirely covered with a black mask and all he could see was her eyes, a pair of bright and shiny eyes. Duan Yu smiled and mused: "Well of course you are more powerful. You are an evil witch, like there is anybody in the world who is more powerful?"

The girl spoke up: "Didn't think you can still smile! What are you smiling at?" Duan Yu made a face at her and smiled some more. "Pa, Pa, Pa, Pa!" The girl smacked him seven or eight more times with the branch. Duan Yu had already

resigned to his fate so he didn't care anymore and, with all his might and effort, kept on smiling. Now the girl wasn't holding anything back and the branches were hitting the most painful places on his body, he almost yelped several times but somehow managed to hold it all back in.

Seeing how stubborn he was, the girl was even more furious: "Alright, you like being a deaf-mute, then I'll grant your wish and make you a real deaf-mute!" She reached into her shirt and grabbed a dagger out. The dagger was about fifteen centimeters long and looked sharp and intimidating. She took several steps towards him, placed the dagger by his left ear, and asked menacingly: "Did you hear what I said? Do you want to keep this ear or not?" Seeing that Duan Yu was still not replying, a murderous look suddenly appeared in her eyes as she raised the dagger and brought it down toward his ear.

In a panic, Duan Yu shouted: "Hey, hey, hey! Are you for real? This would make me go deaf in that ear, do you know how to cure that?" The girl replied: "Pei! I can kill people and make them come back to life! Don't believe me? Then let's give it a try!" Duan Yu immediately replied: "I believe you, I believe you! No need to try it out."

Seeing that he finally spoke up, the girl felt as she has won and decided to stop torturing him. So she picked him up and put him on to the back of the horse and then jumped on behind him. This time she actually put him with his head up and foot down, giving him a little special treatment. Even though he wasn't upside down anymore, his hands and legs were still tightly bounded. But compared to the upside down position he was in earlier, this was heaven, so he did not dare to say anything to the girl in fear of upsetting her.

After travelling for more than an hour, Duan Yu was starting to get impatient about the fact that his hands were still tied. But he could not gesture to the girl because his hands were tied together, and he couldn't come up with an appropriate gesture even if his hands were free. So he had to

Speak up: "I have to go, could miss please kindly untie me?" The girl replied: "Oh! So you are not a mute anymore are you? Why are you talking to me now?" Duan Yu replied, quite frankly: "I can't help it and wouldn't dare to shame miss. Miss smells so good, but if I proceed to become "Stinky", wouldn't that really make this ride less enjoyable?" The girl could not help but let out a little peal of laughter. Figuring he has had enough, she cut loose the rope that was tied around his hands and legs and began to walk off.

After being tied up for so long, Duan Yu's arms and legs went numb a long time ago and he could not move at all. All he could do for a while was roll around on the ground before he could finally stand up. After taking care of his business, he noticed that Black Rose was just standing there eating grass, looking just as tame and obedient as can be. He thought: "What are you waiting for? Run!" So he secretly got onto the saddle as Black Rose did not show the least bit of resistance. With one jerk of the reins, the horse started to gallop northward.

Hearing hoofbeats, the girl came chasing after them. But with Black Rose's blazing speed, the girl wouldn't have been able to chase them down no matter how great her Qing Gong was. Duan Yu turned around, cupped his fist, and saluted: "Miss, we will meet again!" Just in the time he said those words, Black Rose put another fifty or so meters between them. The next time he turned around, the girl was already not in sight. Finally escaping from the clutches of this devious girl, he could not feel any happier as he continually urged on: "Good horsey, good horsey! Faster, faster!"

After running for a bit, Duan Yu calculated: "So that's a day wasted, am I still able to save Miss Zhong in time? No choice left but keep on running without stopping for food or sleep. Wonder if Black Rose could hold up?" He was still pondering that question when suddenly there came a loud and clear whistle from behind.

When Black Rose heard the whistle, she immediately turned around and started running back. Shocked, Duan Yu began to beg: "Good horsey, nice horsey! Don't go back!" He pulled on the reins as hard as he could trying to make Black Rose turn around. But even when her head was pulled almost sideways, Black Rose was still running forward, not listening to his commands at all.

In a blink of an eye, Black Rose had returned to the girl in black's side and stopped. Duan Yu wasn't sure if he felt like crying or laughing as he just sat there completely speechless with a peculiar expression on his face. Coldly, the girl said: "I didn't really want to kill you, but even if I don't count the fact that you ran away on your own, there is still the fact that you stole my horse! How do you count yourself as a real man?"

Duan Yu jumped off the horse and replied back with all the aplomb of someone who knew he was in the right: "I'm not your slave, I can leave and go whenever I want, how could you call that 'run away'? You lent me Black Rose earlier, I haven't given her back yet, so that can't be counted as stealing either. If you want to kill then go right ahead. ZenZi said: 'Reversing thyself, millions of men can't do, tis enlightenment!' I came back by myself, so of course I'm a real man!"

The girl replied: "What are you talking about? Even if you reverse thyself I'm still going to poke a hole in you with my sword!" Obviously not understanding what he said, she grabbed the handle of her sword and pulled it out halfway: "How dare you do that? Think I can't kill you? Is that why you are being so hardheaded and fighting me every step of the way?"

Duan Yu rebuked: "I have done nothing wrong towards Miss in my heart, who is the one being stubborn and antagonistic here?"

The girl stared at him with that icy stare of hers and Duan Yu stared back right back at her without the slightest hint of

backing off in his stare. The two of them stood there staring at each other for a long time before the girl finally slammed her sword completely back into the sheath and commanded: "Go away! You can temporarily keep that head of yours for me to take whenever I feel like it in the future." Duan Yu had already figured that he was going to die and was hugely surprised that she would let him go. Still in shock, he did not say another word and started to limp off because of the numbness that was still in his legs.

After walking for several dozen meters, he still did not hear any hoofbeats; so he turned around and saw that the girl was still standing there in a trance. He figured: "She's probably thinking about how to get me next time, like what a cat does to a mouse. Only when she had enough fun with me will she finally kill me. Alright, it's not like I can escape anyway, whatever happens happens." Surprisingly, after walking for a long time, he still did not hear any hoofbeats.

After walking through several forks in the road, he began to feel safer and safer. Because of that, he began to notice the pain from all the scratches and bumps on his body. He mused: "Such weird moods that girl has, maybe it's because her parents died when she was little and she had to endure all kinds of stuff in her life... maybe it's because she is indescribably ugly, to the point that she could not face others. Either way she is a tragic character. Ai-yo! That golden box that Madame Zhong gave me is still on her!" But he did not dare to even think about going back and getting it from her, so he figured: "When I finally meet father, I'll just promise him that I'll be willing to learn kungfu and, without a doubt, father would be willing to go save Miss Zhong, even if my dad doesn't go himself, he would just send some people to do it for her. That golden box really doesn't have much use now that I think about it. Pity that I don't have a ride anymore, if I try to walk to DaLi like this, more likely than not I would just die from that poison before I even get there. Miss Zhong is probably about to die from waiting for

me to go save her. When she sees that I hadn't returned and her father did not come and save her, she would probably figure that I didn't deliver my message to her. The least I should do is somehow make it back to No Measure Mountain and die with her, that way at least she would know that I did not betray her."

Now that he made up his mind, he immediately looked around to figure out which direction No Measure Mountain was and began walking in that direction. The banks of LanCang River were desolate, he did not see or meet any signs of human life for several kilometers. The entire day he had to resort to eating wild fruits and sleeping in a ditch on the side of a hill.

It was in the afternoon the next day when he crossed another iron-chained bridge and crossed LanCang River again. Afterwards he walked for another twenty or so kilometers and finally reached a little town. All the money he had were lost a long time ago, probably when he fell down the cliff. Noticing that his clothing were just absolutely ruined and feeling very hungry, he suddenly remembered that the piece of jade that was on his hat was valuable, so he tore it down and went to the pawn shop in town. The pawn shop was not an ideal place to exchange jewelry, but this was the only decent pawn shop in town. The shopkeeper did not treat Duan Yu condescendingly because he acted rather wealthy despite his appearance. Still, he did not understand a thing about jade and was only willing to offer two taels of silver for it. Duan Yu did not bother with arguing and took his offer. He wanted to go buy some new clothes, but there wasn't a place in town that sells clothing so he found a little restaurant and ordered some food.

As he sat down, he noticed that both of his kneecaps were protruding out of holes in his pants and that the front and back of his robe were torn off; not to mention that there was a hole in the back of his pants, revealing much of his behind, which was feeling very cold sitting on the bench. He

mused: "This is really quite impolite to be like this, best to take care of this as soon as possible." The waiter brought the dishes to his table and said: "So sorry, but we don't have any meat or fish today. Please forgive us, here is some vegetable and tofu to go down with the rice." Duan Yu replied as he brought the bowl of rice up to his mouth: "It's alright, it's alright." He had been wearing the best of clothes and eating the best of foods all his life. But because he hadn't eaten anything for days, this little meal of rice and vegetables was one of the best he ever had in his life.

By the time he made it to the third bowl, he suddenly heard someone outside saying: "Dear, there's a little restaurant here, let's see what they have." A girl replied with a laugh: "What kind of look is that to give me? Looks like you haven't eaten in days."

The voices were strangely familiar to Duan Yu before he suddenly realized that they belonged to Gan GuangHao of No Measure Mountain and his Sister Ge. Panicking, he immediately turned so he faced inward, thinking: "'Dear'? Hm, they must have gotten married. It is just like that saying, this Brother Gan here gained a wife, now I'm going to get it."

Gan GuangHao laughed and replied: "Newly weds can never get enough of anything, including food." That Sister Ge laughed and replied in a light voice: "Pei! You are so bad! If we were old, then we would be full all the time?" Her voice was filled with tenderness. The two of them walked in the restaurant and sat down. Gan GuangHao shouted at the top of his lungs: "Waiter, bring some wine and rice, and then cook us a dish of beef... eh!"

Duan Yu heard footsteps approaching from behind followed by a huge hand slapping him on the shoulder and turning him around. Suddenly, he was staring straight at Gan GuangHao's face and vice versa. Forcing a smile, Duan Yu said: "Brother Gan, Sister Gan, congratulations. Wish you two would live for a one hundred years and grow old

together, bringing the East and West Factions of No Measure Sword together as one."

Gan GuangHao busted out laughing as he turned around and shot a glance at Sister Ge. Duan Yu followed his eyesight and saw that Sister Ge had an egg shaped face with a couple of blemishes on her left cheek. She was somewhat attractive, but the expression on her face was one of murder as she lowered her voice and instructed: "Get to the bottom of this, find out how he got here and are there anybody from No Measure Sword around here?"

The smile on Gan GuangHao's face immediately disappeared as he viciously demanded: "Did you hear what my dear said to you? Well?" Duan Yu calculated: "If I just make up some stuff, maybe I'll scare the bejesus out of them and they'll run away without killing me." So he said: "There were four elder disciples from your sect hurriedly walking by just a bit earlier with swords in hand. They were heading east, as if they were chasing someone or something."

Gan GuangHao was shocked as he turned around to Sister Ge: "Let's go!" That Sister Ge stood up and made a chop motion with her right hand. Gan GuangHao nodded, pulled out his sword, and swung it down towards the middle of Duan Yu's head.

This move was so quick that even though Duan Yu, knowing that things weren't looking up the moment he saw Sister Ge's gesture, ducked as soon as he saw the gesture, he still could not get out of the way. Just as it looked as if the blade was touching his skin, there suddenly came a light sound of something flying through the air as Gan GuangHao fell backwards, dropping the sword onto the ground. Another sound followed quickly and Sister Ge, who was halfway out of the door when she heard Gan GuangHao's groan, did not even have a chance to turn before collapsing onto the ground. The two of them twitched around for a bit on the ground before becoming motionless. There was a small black arrow stuck in Gan GuangHao's throat and that Sister Ge

was hit on the back of her head. As for those two light sounds, they were precisely the sound of the projectiles that the girl in black used last night had made.

In shock and surprise, Duan Yu turned around, but there was nobody behind him. Then he heard a slight horse neigh outside and saw that girl slowly approaching on the Black Rose.

Duan Yu shouted before shooting out of the door: "Thank you so much for saving me!" The girl did not even look at him as she and her horse kept on trotting along. Duan Yu added: "If you hadn't shot out those two arrows, this head of mine would have been disconnected from my neck a long time ago." The girl still did not respond.

The owner of that little restaurant came running out shouting: "Mi... Mister, some... someone has been killed!" Duan Yu suddenly realized: "Ai-yo! I haven't paid!" He was just about to reach for the silver when he noticed that Black Rose was already several meters away, so he shouted: "There are some money on the dead people, they were paying everyone because they just married, just take some!" He turned around and went chasing after the girl.

Having the horse walking slowly, the girl soon was out of the town. Duan Yu, trying to keep up, spoke up: "Miss, why don't you be a good person all the way to the end, you know: "Send Buddha all the way to the West." Why don't you go save Miss Zhong with me?" The girl replied coldly: "Zhong Ling is my friend, I was going to go save her anyway. But what I hate most is people begging me. You are begging me to go save her, so I won't!" Duan Yu immediately tried to retract what he said: "Alright, alright, I won't beg Miss to." The girl replied: "But you already begged me." Duan Yu replied: "What I just said didn't count." The girl rebuked: "Hmph, a real man can't go back on his words!"

Duan Yu thought to himself: "Before I always called myself a real man in front of her, seems like she doesn't like that. Oh well, to save Miss Zhong, I guess I can't be a real

man anymore." So he said: "I'm not a real man, I... I'm a small, pitiful bug who was saved by Miss."

The girl let out a peal of laughter and sized him up for a bit before saying: "Well you are quite nice towards that little devil. Last night you were willing to give up your life to be a real man, but now you were willing to be a little bug. Hmph, I'm not going!"

Panicking, Duan Yu asked: "Wh... What's that for?" The girl replied: "My master told me that all men in this world are evil, all they do is lie and not one of them have good intentions in their hearts. So I shouldn't listen or trust a single sentence from a man." Duan Yu replied: "That's not always true, like... like...." He couldn't come up with an example on the spot, so he just said: "Like Miss's father, now he must have been a great man!" The girl rebuked: "My master told me that my father was not a good man."

Duan Yu suddenly noticed that she had just urged Black Rose to walk faster so much so that he was having a difficult time keeping up, so he shouted: "Miss, please wait up!"

Suddenly there was a flash of shadows and four figures jumped out from the woods on the side of the road, blocking the way. Black Rose immediately stopped and took two steps back. All four of them were young girls, their clothing were all jade green and both of them had a hook-like sword in each hand. The one in the middle demanded: "You two are Gan GuangHao and Ge GuangPei of No Measure Sword, right?"

Duan Yu replied: "No, not at all. Gan GuangHao and Miss... Mrs. Ge already... already..." The girl cut him off: "Already? Already what? A pair of male and female, young, traveling together, you two are obviously running away or eloping. How could you not be those two traitors from No Measure Sword?" With a laugh, Duan Yu replied: "Miss, that seems to be stretching it a bit don't you think? Ge GuangPei has some blemishes on her face, but Miss here is pretty like

the flower and the moon. Big, big difference." The girl turned to the girl in black and demanded: "Take off your mask!"

The girl in black suddenly shot out four arrows. "Zeng," "Zeng!" Two of the girls in green knocked the two of the arrows down with the hook-like sabre they had in hand while the other two girls were hit and down onto the ground. These four arrows came out of nowhere, without the slightest of warning, and were flying at an amazing speed, yet two of them still were knocked out of the air. The girl in black immediately hopped off the horse. With her sword already pulled out by the time she landed, she stepped forward with her right foot as soon as her left foot landed and made two moves, attacking the two girls who were still standing. The two girls also jumped forth and began attacking, one of them fighting the girl in black while the other turned her sabre toward Duan Yu.

"Ai-yo!" Duan Yu screamed before scrambling underneath Black Rose's belly. Not expecting that he would pull such an unorthodox move, the girl was taken aback for a split second. Just as she recovered and was getting ready to stab Duan Yu, a pain suddenly shot up her back and she collapsed immediately. Turned out that the girl in black caught her with another arrow in that little opening. But because of this little bit of distraction caused by shooting out another arrow, the girl in black was also hit by the hook-like sabre on her left shoulder. With a loud tearing sound, the hook at the end of the sabre hooked onto her sleeve and tore off half of the sleeve, revealing a snow-white shoulder. There was a half-meter long cut on her shoulder, which immediately began gushing blood.

The girl in black tried to counter with her sword, but the girl in green's kung fu was superb and the twin hooked-sabres in her hand were dancing as her moves were fast and clever. Soon, the girl in black's left leg was hit as well, tearing open her trouser leg. The girl in black countered by launching two more arrows, both of which were knocked

down by the hooked-sabres. The girl in green demanded several times: "Who are you? Your sword techniques aren't those of No Measure Sword's, who are you?" The girl in black did not reply as her moves sped up. Suddenly she let out a little yelp as her sword was caught in between hooks of the twin hooked-sabres. The girl in green turned her wrist, the girl in black could not keep her grip on the sword as she had to let go and immediately jump back in defense. The girl in green quickly followed with several thrusts of her hooked-sabres, all of which were dodged by the girl in black.

Duan Yu had started to panic a long time ago, but he couldn't do anything except look on. But now, seeing that the girl in black was in grave danger, all coherent thought went out of his head as he grabbed a corpse that was lying on the ground. Grabbing the stomach of the body with both hands, he turned it into a huge battering ram and charged toward the girl in green.

Startled, the girl in green suddenly noticed that the thing that was coming at her was her sister's head. As a wave of bitter sadness washed over her, she swung at Duan Yu's face with the hooked-sabre in her right hand. But with an entire corpse in between them, the move came up about one fourth of a meter short. "Bang!" The head of the corpse hit her squarely in the chest, it was also at that precise moment when a small arrow shot into her right eye, causing her to collapse onto the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, Duan Yu saw that the girl was half-kneeling on her left knee, so he shouted: "Miss, are... are you alright?" He ran over and tried to help her up. The girl slowly stood up and was immediately startled because, in a panic, Duan Yu had forgotten to put down the corpse. So here he was, running at the girl with a head of a corpse aimed straight at her chest. The girl gave the corpse a push on its head and, with a shout, Duan Yu fell backwards, the corpse neatly landing on top of him.

Seeing the peculiar position that Duan Yu was in, the girl could not help but let out a bit of laugh. Then she began to worry, knowing that she was in grave danger just a moment ago. If she had not killed two of them using surprise right off and gotten Duan Yu's help, she probably couldn't even defeat one of the girls. Where did these four girls come from? How come their kungfu was so good? She turned to Duan Yu: "Hey, dummy, what are you doing with a corpse?"

Duan Yu got back up and put down the corpse: "Terrible, just terrible. Ay! So sorry. You took us for someone else, all you had to do was ask us politely and all of this would have been cleared up. But you had to talk all that nonsense, causing Miss here to get mad. Miss, actually you didn't really need to kill, wouldn't it have been better if you just took your mask off and let them see?"

The girl angrily rebuked: "Shut up! I don't need to listen to you! Who told them to call us e... elo... whatever!" Duan Yu replied: "Yes, yes of course. They were definitely wrong to suggest what they suggested. But Miss, you didn't have to kill them. Ah! You... you better wrap your wounds up a little." He just caught a glimpse of her snow white thighs because her pants were ripped, not daring to look at it anymore, he immediately turned his head the other way.

Getting tired of hearing him telling her she should not have killed, the girl was just about to slap him again when he suddenly mentioned her wounds. Immediately she began to feel the pain from her wounds on her arm and leg, luckily the wounds were not deep and were not to the bone. So she immediately applied some blood-clotter and bandaged her wounds up using cloth she tore from the corpse's clothing. Duan Yu, meanwhile, moved all the bodies into a pile of hay and said: "I should dig a grave for you, but I don't have a hoe or a shovel. Ay! Misses were so young, although all of you aren't that pretty, but you weren't ugly either...."

Hearing him talk about their looks, the girl was reminded of something: "Hey! How do you know that I don't have

blemishes on my face and is pretty like a flower or the moon or whatever?" Duan Yu smiled: "Of course, that goes without saying." The girl replied: "What do you mean of course?" Duan Yu replied: "Of course, means that it could only be like that." The girl rebuked: "Whatever! You couldn't even dream of what I look like, my face is covered with pots and blemishes!" Duan Yu smiled: "Maybe, maybe not."

The girl suddenly realized that it could be a problem that her sleeve and pants were ripped. So she took a robe off of one of the bodies and put it on. "Ai-yo!" Duan Yu shouted as he suddenly remembered the huge holes he had on the back of his pants. How could he be travelling with a girl with a bare butt? He immediately begin walking backwards; making sure he didn't turn his butt towards the girl in black, he also took a robe off of a body and put it on. The girl let out a peal of laughter. Duan Yu blushed so much that even the base of his ear was red thinking about the hole that was on his pants and what that meant.

The girl pulled out her arrows out from the bodies and placed them back inside her shirt, and then added a couple of kicks onto the body of that girl that injured her.

Duan Yu suggested: "Miss, your arrows seal up the victim's throats as soon as the poison enters the blood. Such powerful and devious poison. I urge Miss not to use it ever again unless you have no other choice. To kill is against the way of heaven, if...." The girl cut him off: "If you talk anymore nonsense, I'll give you a taste of this poison." With a flick of her right arm and a sound of arrow piercing the air, a poison arrow flew past barely past Duan Yu and stuck into the ground.

His face white as a sheet, Duan Yu dared not say a thing. The girl continued: "Let's see if you can still talk nonsense after the poison sealed up your throat!" She reached for another arrow and flicked her arm again. Duan Yu was scared out of his wits and docked.

With a little laugh, the girl put the arrow back into her shirt and gave him a mean looking stare: "You look like a girl with this robe on. Put the hood up. That way if we run into anyone else, they wouldn't say we are el... that are a man and a woman." Duan Yu nodded, took the bandana off his head, placed it inside his shirt, put up the hood, and pulled it down over most of his face. The girl let out a hearty laugh at the sight.

Hearing her sweet and innocent laugh, Duan Yu mused: "From her actions and expressions, you would figure that she's younger than me. Then why is she so cruel and murderous?" He looked up and saw that on the front of her robe was sewn a black vulture. The vulture had its head held up high, looking very proud and powerful, the exact same vulture was on his robe as well. He shook his head and sighed: "Girls actually having this on their robes rather than flowers or butterflies. Ay! Such demeanors."

The girl shot him a look: "Are you mocking me!" Duan Yu immediately replied: "No, no, not at all, I wouldn't dare!" The girl probed further: "So what's your answer? 'No' or 'Wouldn't dare'?" Duan Yu replied: "I wouldn't dare." The girl nodded and did not ask any further.

Duan Yu turned around and asked her: "Are you hurt bad? Do you want to rest a bit?" The girl angrily replied: "Of course it hurts! Let me take a couple of swipes on you and you can see for yourself!" Duan Yu thought to himself: "Well, epitome of bitchness." The girl continued: "Are you really worried that my wounds are hurting? There isn't a man in the world that's this nice. You just want me to go save Zhong Ling as quickly as possible, just that you can't say it out loud. Heh, let's go!" She walked to Black Rose's side and hopped on. Pointing northwest, she asked: "Sword Lake Palace of No Measure Mountain is in that direction right?" Duan Yu replied: "I guess, seems like it."

The two of them started to slowly walk in that direction. After a while, the girl suddenly asked: "Who's birthdate was

that inside of the golden box?" Duan Yu thought: "So you have opened it up already." "I don't know," he replied. "It's Zhong Ling's," the girl said. "Isn't it?" Duan Yu answered: "I really don't know." The girl angrily demanded: "You are still lying. Madame Zhong has already matched Zhong Ling to you hasn't she? Tell me the truth!" Duan Yu, in a panic, replied: "No, she really hasn't. If I, Duan Yu, am lying, then I will die by your arrows this instant."

"So your name is Duan Yu?" Duan Yu replied: "Yeah, 'Yu' as in 'ming yu', famed name." The girl snorted: "Hmph, is your fame any good? I don't think so." Duan Yu replied with a laugh: "Well the 'ming yu ting huai', name is terrible, is this one also." The girl replied: "That's more like it!" Duan Yu naturally asked: "So what is Miss's surname?" The girl rebuked: "Why should I tell you? You told me your name on your own, I didn't ask you."

After another long stretch of silent walking, the girl spoke up again: "Later on after we saved Zhong Ling, that little devil will surely tell me my name, you are not allowed to hear it!" Trying hard not to burst out laughing, Duan Yu replied: "Alright, I won't hear it." The girl seemed to have felt that this matter was a bit hard to accomplish, so she added: "Even if you did hear it, you are not allowed to remember it!" Duan Yu offered: "Alright, even if I do happen to remember, I would try my hardest to forget it." The girl rebuked: "Pei! You are lying, think I can't tell?"

Through all this talking, the sky slowly turned dark and soon the moon rose from the east. The two of them hurried along the path under the moonlight. Around ten, Duan Yu suddenly saw a bonfire in the mountainside facing them, at the base of the peak just north of the bonfire was several large buildings. Recognizing that's the Sword Lake Palace, Duan Yu pointed at the bonfire and said: "Divine Farmer Clan is right over there. Let's sneak up on them, grab Zhong Ling and run. How about that?"

Coldly, the girl asked: "And how exactly do we run away?" Duan Yu replied: "You and Zhong Ling would ride on Black Rose, there's no way that Divine Farmer Clan can catch up to you." The girl asked: "Then what about you?" Duan Yu replied: "I was forced to take the Intestine Fragmenter by the Divine Farmer Clan, SiKong Xuan told me that after seven days the poison would break out and I would die. So I have to somehow get the cure first before I can run away."

The girl observed: "So you were poisoned by them. Then you should be in a hurry to get the cure, why did you come back to deliver me a message?" Duan Yu replied: "I figured that with Black Rose's speed, reporting that message wouldn't take much time at all." The girl was puzzled: "Are you really that nice? Or are you just an idiot?" Duan Yu laughed: "Most likely half and half."

The girl humphed at that remark and asked: "So how are you going to get the cure?" Duan Yu thought out loud: "The original agreement was the cure of Lightning's poison for the cure for the Intestine Fragmenter. They are not going to get the cure to Lightning's poison, so it would be very difficult to trick them into giving me the cure for the Intestine Fragmenter. Miss, do you have any ideas?" The girl rebuked: "Only men knows how to trick people, I don't know how to. I'm going to just ask them straightforward to hand over Zhong Ling and the cure or else!"

A wave of coldness shot through Duan Yu's heart, knowing that she's probably going to start killing big time again, he thought: "It's best if... best if..." But exactly was the best outcome, he had no idea at all.

The two of them began walking towards the fire. When they got to about twenty meters away from it, two men suddenly jumped out of the darkness with a bag of drugs in hand, ready to throw. One of them demanded: "Who is it? What are you doing here?"

The girl demanded in return: "Where's SiKong Xuan? Tell him to come here!"

In the moonlight, the two men noticed that the girl and Duan Yu were both wearing a green robe with a black vulture on their chest. The two of them were shocked and immediately kneeled down: "Yes, yes of course! We did not know that Holy Emissaries from the Nimble Vulture Palace would be arriving, so... so sorry for getting in your way, please forgive us." His voice was shaking, as if he was scared to death.

Duan Yu was immensely puzzled: "What emissary from Nimble Vulture Peak?" Then he suddenly understood: "Oh! That's right! They are thinking we are somebody else because we have this green robe on!" Then he remembered that several days ago back in the Sword Lake Palace Zhong Ling said that she overheard SiKong Xuan talking with his underlings, saying something about following orders from Kid Elder of Heaven Mountain of Nimble Vulture Palace to come and take over Sword Lake Palace of No Measure Mountain. "So it turns out that Divine Farmer Clan is a subsidiary of Nimble Vulture Palace, no wonder these two men are so scared."

Of course, the girl did not understand what's going on, so she asked: "What Nim...." Afraid that she might expose the two of them, Duan Yu raised the pitch of his voice and said: "Get SiKong Xuan here now!" The two men replied: "Yes, yes, right away!" They immediately stood up and took a couple of steps backwards before finally turning around and starting to run toward the fire.

Duan Yu whispered to the girl: "Nimble Vulture Palace are their superiors." He put up the face mask of the hood and covered the bottom half of his face, leaving only his eyes visible.

The girl was about to ask something else but was cut off because SiKong Xuan had hurried arrived and said out loud: "Your humble servant SiKong Xuan welcome the Holy

Emissaries. Please forgive us for not welcoming you earlier. How is the Kid Elder? May she live for ten thousand years!"

Duan Yu was thinking to himself: "Who's Kid Elder? She isn't the king or the mother of the king, so wishing her to live ten thousand years just doesn't seem right does it?" So he just nodded and replied: "Get up." SiKong Xuan kowtowed twice more before standing back up. By this time there was a huge crowd of people behind him, all of them in the Divine Farmer Clan.

{Note: in ancient China, it was custom to bless the Emperor and only the Emperor with a ten thousand year life-span and any other member of the royal family with one thousand year life-span. To wish that upon anyone other than royalty or to wish a different life-span to royalty was almost treason.}

Duan Yu spoke up: "Where's that girl from the Zhong family? Bring her here!" Two clan members didn't even wait for their master to issue the orders before dashing towards the fire and carrying Zhong Ling over. Duan Yu ordered: "Untie her." SiKong Xuan answered: "Yes, Miss." He pulled out a dagger and cut loose the rope around Zhong Ling's hands and legs. Seeing her still doing very well and unharmed, Duan Yu could barely contain himself as he had to force himself to maintain the high pitch of his voice when he said: "Zhong Ling, come here." Zhong Ling replied: "Who are you?" SiKong Xuan shouted at her: "How dare you be so rude in front of the Holy Emissaries? She told you to go over there!" Zhong Ling figured: "Who cares who the hell you are, you told him to untie me and this old Goat Beard is so scared of you, so there shouldn't be much harm in doing what you told me." So she walked over to Duan Yu.

Duan Yu reached out with her left hand, took her hand into his, and pulled her over to his side. He squeezed her hand and made a gesture to her, but figuring that she probably wouldn't understand, he turned to SiKong Xuan: "Hand over the cure for Intestine Fragmenter!"

SiKong Xuan wasn't quite sure what was going on, but he still ordered: "Bring my medicine box! Hurry, hurry!" With a little pause, he immediately understood: "Ai-yo! That bastard named Duan must have gone and begged these emissaries, that's why they are asking for the cure." When the medicine box arrived, he opened it up and took out a small bottle. Holding it up respectfully, he said: "This medicine needs to be taken for three straight days, once each day, and about a gram or so each time." Happy beyond words, Duan Yu took it.

Zhong Ling suddenly spoke up: "Hey, Goat Beard, got any of the medicine left? Remember that you promised Big Brother Duan to cure him? If you give all you got to them, what would happen if my Big Brother Duan comes with my dad?"

The girl in black couldn't stand this any longer and commanded: "Zhong Ling, be quiet! Your Big Brother Duan will be just fine!" Finding her voice very familiar, Zhong Ling turned towards her. When Zhong Ling laid her eyes on her mask, she immediately recognized her and uttered: "Ah, Mu...." But she realized soon enough that something was going on and put her hand over her mouth in time.

SiKong Xuan was quite worried as well as he kneeled and said: "Holy Emissaries, your servant had been bitten by this little girl's poisonous marten, please show some mercy." Duan Yu figured that if he did not somehow cure him then they would have a fight to the death on their hands. So he turned to the girl in black and said: "Sister, why don't you give him some of Kid Elder's Cure-All Elixir?" Hearing that there was a Cure-All Elixir here, SiKong Xuan could not believe his ears as he kowtowed loudly several times all the while saying: "Your humble servant will be forever grateful for the mercy and benevolence of the Kid Elder and the Holy Emissaries. There are a total of nineteen of us that has been bitten."

The girl thought: "What is he talking about? 'Cure-All Elixir'? But since I'm wounded on my leg and arm, it would be quite troublesome to protect two people now. So I guess I'll just go along with this Duan guy and play this Goat Beard for a bit." So she reached into her shirt and took out a small bottle: "Put your hand out." SiKong Xuan obeyed and lowered his head as well, not daring to look at the emissary directly. The girl poured a little bit of some green powder in his hand and instructed: "Take some orally and everything should be alright then." All the while she was thinking: "This fragrance powder of mine didn't come easily, can't let you get too much of that."

As soon as she opened the bottle, SiKong Xuan could smell a delicious and refreshing fragrance. He had spent his entire life around medicine and herbs, yet he could not make out what the powder was made of. By the time the powder was poured onto his hand, the smell had made him feel all warm and fuzzy all over. Figuring the Kid Elder must be amazing as this powder was, as expected, almost magical in its effects, he thanked them repeatedly, but with the powder in his hand, he could not kowtow.

Seeing that everything had been accomplished without a hitch, Duan Yu said: "Sister, let's go!" Lost in the moment, he actually forgot to mask his voice, but luckily SiKong Xuan and his underlings did not notice.

SiKong Xuan reported: "Holy Emissaries, Zuo ZiMuo of No Measure Mountain actually dared to refuse our threats. Because of your servant's wound and loss of arm, this matter was not resolved quickly and I am ashamed. I will order my men to attack right now and we will take over Sword Lake Palace. I humbly request that the Holy Emissaries to stay and observe the battle."

Duan Yu replied: "No need. I think there really isn't any need to attack this Sword Lake Palace anymore either, why don't you guys go home?"

SiKong Xuan was shocked, because he knew the Kid Elder's temperament very well. The nicer the emissaries she sent are, the worse the punishment as the emissary would almost always talk sarcastically opposite of what they mean. Figuring that the emissary must be criticizing him for failing to accomplish his mission, he panicked: "I realize my fault, I realize my mistake, please forgive me! Could the Holy Emissary please say a couple of good things on my behalf to the Kid Elder? I beg of you!"

Afraid to say anything more, Duan Yu just waved his hand somewhat and, dragging Zhong Ling with him, began to walk away. SiKong Xuan kept on his knees and spoke loudly: "The Divine Farmer Clan is honored to send the Holy Emissaries on their way. May the Kid Elder live forever!" The clan members behind him repeated altogether: "The Divine Farmer Clan is honored to send the Holy Emissaries on their way. May the Kid Elder live forever!" Already several meters away, Duan Yu thought the sight of all these men on their knees together were quite humorous and shouted back: "May Mr. SiKong Xuan live forever as well!"

To SiKong Xuan, that sentence was filled with sarcasm and he almost fainted from the shock. The two men behind him noticed that their leader was shaking and immediately jumped up to support him fearing that he might drop some of the "Cure-All Elixir" in his hands.

Duan Yu and the two girls walked for several dozen meters until they couldn't hear the Divine Farmer Clan anymore. Zhong Ling whistled repeatedly trying to get her marten back but to no avail. So she turned to the girl in black: "Sister Mu, thank you and this other sister so much, but I have to stay here."

The girl asked: "What for? Waiting for that poisonous marten of yours?" Zhong Ling replied: "No, I'm waiting for my Big Brother Duan, he went to get my father here to cure those poisoned guys in the Divine Farmer Clan." Turning to Duan Yu, she said: "Sister, can you give me some of the cure

for Intestine Fragmenter?" The girl interrupted: "That Duan guy won't be coming around here again." In a panic, Zhong Ling replied: "No way, that can't be. He said he would! Even if my father won't come, Big Brother Duan would still come back!" The girl retorted: "Hmph! Men only know how to lie, you shouldn't believe anything he said." Zhong Ling began to sniff a little: "Big Brother Duan would nev... never lie to me."

Duan Yu couldn't control himself any longer and, with a laugh, took off his mask: "Miss Zhong, your Big Brother Duan really didn't lie to you."

Zhong Ling stared at him, rendered utterly speechless, for a long time before finally becoming overwhelmed with joy and jumped onto him with her arms around his neck while screaming: "You didn't lie to me, I knew you wouldn't!"

The girl suddenly grabbed her by the back of her collar, pulled her aside, and coldly commented: "Don't do that!" Zhong Ling was quite surprised by that, but being as happy as she was, she didn't care. So she asked: "Sister Mu, how did you two meet?" The girl just humphed and didn't respond.

Worried about SiKong Xuan come chasing up after finding how ineffective the powder was, Duan Yu spoke up: "Why don't we get going? We can talk about on the way." The girl in black climbed onto her horse and was out in front while Duan Yu briefly told Zhong Ling what had happened, judiciously leaving out the part about how the girl tortured him and only saying that she saved his life. After listening to the whole story, Zhong Ling yelled out to the girl: "Sister Mu, thank you so much for saving Big Brother Duan, I don't know if I can ever pay you back for that." A bit peeved, the girl rebuked: "I saved him by my own accord, what does it have to do with you?" Zhong Ling stuck her tongue out at Duan Yu and made a face at that remark.

The girl continued: "Hey, Duan Yu, I know that little devil Zhong Ling is going to tell you my name, so I'm going to tell

you now. My name is Mu WanQing." Duan Yu replied: "Ah, 'Firewood is pure and flowery, pity to the pure willows.' (Huo Mu Qing Hua, Wan Xi Qing Yang) Such a good name and surname." Mu WanQing replied: "Better than your 'one piece of wood, terrible fame (Yi Duan Mu Tou, Ming Yu Ji Huai).'" Duan Yu burst out laughing at that comment.

{ Duan Yu quoted a piece of poetry that I'm not too sure about the meaning of, so I just kind of went with the literal meanings of the word, sorry if it is off. If you know what it really means, please e-mail me. Thanks.}

Zhong Ling grabbed Duan Yu's left hand and gently said: "Big Brother Duan, you are so good to me." Duan Yu replied: "Only thing is that it's a shame that you can't find your marten." Zhong Ling whistled a couple of more times before replying: "No big deal really, after those bad guys leave, I'll come back here and look for him. Will you come and keep me company?" Duan Yu nodded and replied: "Of course!" Thinking about that jade statue in that cave, he added: "From now on I would come back here from time to time." Furious, Mu WanQing cut in: "I don't permit you to come back. If she want to look for her marten, then let her come herself." Duan Yu stuck his tongue out at Zhong Ling and made a face. The two of them looked at each other and smiled.

The three of them did not talk for a long while and just walked. After several kilometers, Mu WanQing suddenly asked: "Zhong Ling, is your birthday the 5th of February?" She was still facing forward on her horse, not even turning around. Zhong Ling answered: "Yes it is! Sister Mu, how did you know?" Becoming furious, Mu WanQing shouted: "Still claiming that you aren't lying Duan Yu?" With a jerk of the reins, she and Black Rose began to gallop away.

Suddenly, there came a low and faint whistle from the northwest that was followed by four claps from the northeast corner. A row of silhouettes came flying this way from

directly in front of them and stopped about fifty or so meters away from the three of them. A slight pause followed before a hoarse voice shouted: "Little Whore! Where do you think you are running off to?" The voice belonged to none other than Grandma Rui. Before they could respond, someone started to snicker from behind them. Duan Yu whipped his head around in panic and saw the faint figure of Grandma Ping standing there with the daggers in her hands were almost glowing under the moonlight. There was a man to the left and right of her. The man to her left had a face of white beard and a huge shovel in his hand while the man to her right was a relatively young man that carried a sword. Duan Yu sort of remembered seeing these two men among those who were present in the hall where he first met Mu WanQing.

Mu WanQing sneered: "You ghosts still haven't disappeared yet? Quite an accomplishment for you guys, chasing me all the way here." Grandma Ping replied: "We'll chase you to the end of the world if we have to, you Little Whore!" A small sound came from Mu WanQing as she shot out a small arrow. The swordsman's eye-sight and coordination turned out to be excellent as he knocked the arrow down with his sword. Before anyone else could react, Mu WanQing had launched herself off of her horse and was flying towards the white-bearded old man.

For a man as old as him, his reaction was incredibly fast. With a flick of his right hand, he swung the shovel at Mu WanQing. Still off the ground, Mu WanQing pushed off the face of the shovel with her left foot and flew back towards Grandma Ping. Grandma Ping held up her dagger to block the strike. "Zeng!" The blade of her dagger had been sliced off by the sword, creating a bright flash in the darkness. Grandma Rui immediately attacked Mu WanQing's back in hopes of rescuing Grandma Ping. Not in a hurry to kill Grandma Ping just yet, Mu WanQing rotated her sword sideways, pushed off of Grandma Ping's shoulder with the flat side of the sword, and gently flew off like a feather. Had

it not for Grandma Rui's intervention, she would not have rotated the sword and Grandma Ping would have been sliced in two.

That entire exchange, with all the sudden changes and reverses, took only a couple of seconds. Even though she had just barely escaped death, Grandma Ping was not the least bit scared as she immediately swung her dagger at Mu WanQing three more times, making Mu WanQing dodge and lose the initiative. At the same time, Grandma Rui and two other men charged up and attacked as well. The sword in Mu WanQing's hand flashed repeatedly as she weaved her way among those four attackers. Standing several meters away was Zhong Ling, waving at Duan Yu incessantly: "Big Brother Duan, come here!" Duan Yu asked after he made his way over: "What?" Zhong Ling suggested: "Let's get out of here!" Duan Yu replied: "They are ganging up on Miss Mu, how could we leave just like that?" Zhong Ling replied: "Sister Mu's kungfu is really very good, she could get out of this by herself with no problem at all." Duan Yu shook his head: "She came here to save your life, how could you just leave her like this?" Zhong Ling stumped her foot and replied: "You idiot! Like you can help her out by staying here! Ay! If only Lightning is here!"

At this time, Mu WanQing was fending off the four attackers with all her might. Because Grandma Rui's iron staff and the old man's iron shovel were very noisy because of their length, Mu WanQing was paying very close attention to all the sounds around her and heard this entire exchange between Zhong Ling and Duan Yu.

Duan Yu continued: "Miss Zhong, why don't you leave first? I can't bear to wrong Miss Mu in any way. In the unlikely event that she's overwhelmed, I could try and talk us out it." Zhong Ling replied: "Other than just giving that life of yours away, you really aren't good for anything here. Go! Sister Mu won't be angry at you for it." Duan Yu replied: "If Miss Mu hadn't saved me, I would have died a long time

ago. There's really not much difference in dying half a day earlier or later." Frustrated, Zhong Ling grabbed his arm and started to walk away: "You idiot! I can't win arguing with you like this!"

Duan Yu shouted: "I don't want to leave! I don't want to leave!" But he wasn't strong enough and was being dragged away.

Mu WanQing suddenly shouted: "Zhong Ling, you get yourself out of here! Leave him here!" Zhong Ling began to pull him even harder. "Shoo!" A small arrow suddenly shot into Zhong Ling's hair and got stuck into one of the hair buns in her hair. Mu WanQing threatened: "If you don't let go, the next one is going straight for your eye!" Zhong Ling knew that she was the type that would go through with whatever she says; and although the two of them had been good friends, they still haven't been together long enough to establish any real deep friendship. So she let go, knowing that she was really about to shoot at her eye.

Mu WanQing commanded further: "Zhong Ling, go to your parent's place now! Go! If you wait for your Big Brother Duan at all, then I'm going to shoot three more arrows at you!" She parried away several more attacks as she said this.

Not daring to disobey her, Zhong Ling turned to Duan Yu: "Big Brother Duan, please be careful!" She then covered her face, turned, and disappeared into darkness.

After ordering Zhong Ling away, Mu WanQing went back to concentrating on fending off the attackers. Feeling a faint pain on her leg where she had been hooked, she suddenly changed her fighting style. This time the sword flashed through the darkness over and over again like a meteor shower, ever-changing and unpredictable. Suddenly, the old man screamed in pain for he had been hit in his chest. Mu WanQing followed that with three more thrusts, forcing Grandma Rui and that swordsman to jump out of the fighting circle. Then, spinning the blade of her sword

around, she turned towards Grandma Ping. In a blink of an eye, Grandma Ping had already been hit three times. Ignoring the wounds, Grandma Ping continued to attack like a wild tiger. By now, the other three attackers had rejoined the fight. Grandma Ping rolled to a stop at Mu WanQing's foot and swung at her calf with the dagger in her right hand. Mu WanQing gave her a nice kick, sending her rolling off. At this precise moment, Grandma Rui's iron staff came flying in towards her forehead. Mu WanQing hurriedly brought her sword back, parried the staff away, and moved right into a thrust towards the center of her foes.

Grandma Rui turned her body sideways and brought her staff back to protect herself. Mu WanQing let out a little sigh of relief and was just about to start another attack when a huge amount of pain shot through her. Turned out that the old man, unable to lift his shovel after being injured, pulled out an iron spike, charged in, and was able to stab it into her shoulder. Mu WanQing smacked him over her shoulders and pretty much flattened his entire face, killing him in an instant. But Grandma Rui had charged forth and began attacking again. Grandma Ping screamed: "The Little Whore is hurt, don't worry about catching her life, just kill her!"

Seeing that Mu WanQing was wounded, Duan Yu began to panic. So he, as he did last time, wanted to run over and grabbed the old man's corpse. But with the four fighters in the way, he could not reach the corpse. In desperation, he ripped off the robe he had on and, wildly waving it, charged into the melee and was able to cover up Grandma Ping's head. Shocked that she suddenly lost her sight, she immediately reached with her hand and tried to tear the cloth away. However, in a panic, she had forgotten that she was holding a dagger and was cut on her face, causing her to squeal like a pig. Unable to find enough time to pull out the spike that's imbedded in her left shoulder, Mu WanQing, fighting off the pain as much as she could, hurriedly swung at Grandma Rui twice, then turned and thrust at the

swordsman. These three moves were incredible as Grandma Rui's right cheek had been slashed as was the swordsman's forehead. Although the wounds were harmless, the parts that were hit were vital. And so, in shock, both of them jumped back and felt their wounds with their hands to check on it.

Mu WanQing cursed to herself: "Damn it! Should have killed them!" She took a deep breath and whistled. Black Rose arrived almost instantaneously. She hopped onto the saddle, grabbed Duan Yu by his collar, and lifted him up as well. Black Rose began to gallop west as fast as she could.

They hadn't even gone one hundred meters when there suddenly came a huge amount of shouting behind the woods as several men came charging out, blocking their way. The tall man in the middle yelled: "Little Whore! Your old man here's been waiting for you for a long time now!" He reached up in an attempt to grab a hold of Black Rose's manes. Mu WanQing slightly flicked her right hand and three arrows shot out, hitting three men in the crowd. Taking advantage of the old man's momentary surprise, she pulled on the reins and Black Rose leapt over the head of the men. The men came chasing after her, but, fearing her poisonous arrows, they held their weapons out in front of them and kept getting further and further back. But they were still cursing like crazy: "Whore! She ran away again!" "No matter where you ran off to, we'll still find you and gut you!" "Come on everyone! After her!"

Mu WanQing let Black Rose to run as she pleased through the mountain and arrived at a hillock. Seeing that there was a cliff in front of her, she had no choice but to stop to try and find another way. No Measure Mountain's paths twists and weaves their way up and down the mountain, making it very difficult to navigate through them.

Suddenly, there came shouting from ahead: "That horse is coming back around!" "This way!" "The Little Whore is back!" Because of her wound, Mu WanQing was in no

condition to fight. So she immediately stopped Black Rose and began to run to the right. This time she no longer had time to pick a path and Black Rose was running through the wilderness. Luckily, Black Rose was amazingly strong and agile and was able to traverse through the rocky hillside with no problem whatsoever. After galloping for a long time, Black Rose suddenly mis-stepped with her front legs and bumped her right-front knee on a rock, causing her to limp and slow down.

Worried, Duan Yu suggested: "Miss Mu, let me off. That way you can get away easier and faster with just you riding. They have no enmities or quarrels with me, so it wouldn't be much of a problem if they caught me." Mu WanQing replied: "Hmph! What do you know? You are from DaLi, they would kill you as soon as they catch you." Duan Yu replied: "That's strange, are they planning to kill everyone in DaLi? Miss, please listen to me and escape by yourself."

With her left shoulder just throbbing in pain, Mu WanQing had no patience to listen to Duan Yu ramble. So she shouted: "Shut up! Don't say another word!" Duan Yu replied: "Alright, then could you let me sit behind you instead?" Mu WanQing asked: "Why?" Duan Yu replied: "I left my robe over that fat grandma's head." Mu WanQing wondered: "So?" Duan Yu answered: "There's several holes on the back of my pants, sitting in front of miss with this bare... bare... towards miss... hehe. That's... just too inappropriate."

Barely able to bear the pain on her shoulder, Mu WanQing grabbed his shoulders and, gritting her teeth, squeezed so hard that his bones were cracking and commanded: "Shut up!" Unable to handle the pain, Duan Yu immediately complied: "Alright, alright, I'll shut up."

Chapter 4: High Cliffs and Faraway Persons

Fan translation by Moinllieon ([send email](#)) [Second Edition]
wuxiapedia.com / www.spcnet.tv

After several kilometers, Black Rose found another mountain path. But the mountain path gradually got steeper, causing Black Rose's gallop to get even slower and allowing the cursing and shouting behind them begin to get closer and closer.

"Black Rose, so sorry to make you work so hard today." Duan Yu shouted. "But could you please run just a little faster?" After several more kilometers, he could actually see the reflections off the blades of sabres and swords behind them.

"Faster, faster!" Mu WanQing urged Black Rose continuously and Black Rose's speed picked up. Suddenly, a deep, bottomless gorge dozens of meters wide appeared in front of them. Black Rose let out a long neigh and took several steps back.

Seeing that there's nowhere left to go, Mu WanQing asked: "I'm going to try and jump this gorge. Do you want to stay here or chance it with me?"

"If there's one less person on the horse, then it would be easier for Black Rose to jump this." Duan Yu thought. So he replied: "Why don't miss go first and then pull me over?"

"Not enough time for that!" Mu WanQing replied as the pursuers closed in. Backing up the horse several more steps, she gently patted on its belly a couple of times and shouted: "Shh! Jump it!"

Black Rose shot forth towards the edge of the gorge. Just inches from the end of the path, she jumped. Duan Yu felt as if he was flying through the air, only carried by the clouds;

but his heart beat so fast that it felt as if it was about to jump out of his mouth.

Because of being urged by her master, Black Rose had jumped with all her might and her front hooves landed on the other side. But because the distance between the sides was just too wide and, after running all night and being injured, she was tired, her hindlegs did not reach the other side and she began to fall.

With lightning quick reactions, Mu WanQing immediately grabbed Duan Yu and jumped up off the saddle. Duan Yu landed first and Mu WanQing came crashing down right after, landing neatly into his arms. Fearing that she might be hurt, Duan Yu held onto her as tight as he could. Black Rose's desperate scream could be heard as she fell farther down into the gorge.

Overwhelmed with despair, Mu WanQing struggled out of Duan Yu's embrace and ran to the edge of the cliff. But all that could be seen were clouds and fog, not a trace or sign of Black Rose anywhere. She suddenly felt light headed as the whole world began to spin around her. Her legs gave out from under her as she collapsed onto the ground.

Shocked and afraid that she might fall or roll over the edge, Duan Yu scrambled over as fast as he could. Her eyes were close tightly, she had obviously fainted from what just happened. He was at a lost about what to do next when he suddenly heard someone shouting.

"Shoot! Shoot! Kill the two of them!"

Duan Yu looked up and saw that seven or eight men already arrived at the other side of the gorge. So he immediately picked Mu WanQing up and ran in the other direction. "Soow!" An arrow suddenly whistled by, grazing his ear.

He stumbled around for several more steps before he crouched down to make himself smaller and continued to run away. "Soow!" Another arrow flew right over his head, right where it would have been normally. He suddenly

caught the sight of a huge rock to his left, so he dove behind it. And just in time it appeared, as an endless cacophony of projectiles hitting the rock arose as soon as he jumped behind the rock. Duan Yu stayed as still as he could, not daring to move a muscle.

"Smash!" A huge rock suddenly sailed over the rock and landed just beside him. The person who tossed the rock must have been incredibly strong as to be able to toss such a huge piece of stone more than thirty meters. Fortunately for Duan Yu, the distance made it almost impossible to aim the throw.

Figuring that this place wasn't safe after all, Duan Yu immediately picked Mu WanQing up again. In one breath, he ran as fast as he could for about another forty meters or so. Only then did he feel safe from all the projectiles and stop.

He caught his breath and gently laid Mu WanQing down onto the grass. He then jumped behind another rock and stuck his head out to take a peek at the other side of the gorge.

By now the other side was filled with people as every one of them was pointing one way or another as if they were planning something. Once in a while Duan Yu would hear a sentence or two of what they said, filled with cursing and rude comments, that was carried over by the wind.

"If they went around the mountain and came up from the other side, then the two of us would be completely defenseless." Duan Yu thought to himself.

So he walked over to the other end of the mountain top, looked down, and scared himself so much that he almost lost his balance. Several hundred meters below the edge of the cliff a huge, jade colored river was roaring by. Turned out they had arrived at the shores of LanCang River. The rapids were furious, no way to get up from this side. But if those guys get to the bottom of the gorge, they could climb up this side and the two of them would still be killed. He took a deep breath and sighed, figuring that whatever happens

happens and that he'll worry about what to do when the time comes. Suddenly, something he said just a little bit before popped back into his head: "There's really not much to be gained from dying half a day earlier or later."

He returned to Mu WanQing's side. Noticing that she still hasn't come to, he was trying hard to figure out how to wake her up when he noticed that there was an iron spike sticking out from the back of her left shoulder and the blood from the wound covered most of her shirt. He was busy running for his life earlier and sitting in front of her on the horse before that, so he had no idea that she had suffered such a horrendous wound.

"Is she dead?" was the first thought that popped into his head. So he immediately moved her veil aside and put his finger underneath her nose to check her breathing. He was greatly relieved when he felt a faint breath.

"Got to pull that spike out and stop the bleeding." He decided. So he grabbed the spike, bit down hard, and pulled. The spike came out rather easily. But he did not know what to expect and had his entire face covered by a spray of blood.

Mu WanQing screamed in pain as it woke her up, but she then immediately fainted again.

Duan Yu pushed down on her wound as much as he could, trying to stop the bleeding. But the blood was almost squirting out and it looked hopeless. At his wit's end, he pulled a handful of grass from the ground, stuffed them into his mouth, chewed them into a pulp, and smeared it over her wound. But the blood just washed the pulp off the wound.

"When she was wounded by those hooks," he suddenly remembered, "she used some herbs or medicine from her shirt and the bleeding stopped soon after."

He gently reached into her shirt and took out the objects one by one. There was one comb made out of yellow poplar, a small mirror, two pink handkerchiefs, three small wooden

boxes, and one porcelain flask. He was taken aback when he saw these female items. Only now did he realize that this was a girl in front of him and realized how inappropriate it was for him to reach into her shirt and feel around. Also, it was very difficult to link these female items with this merciless killer.

He had seen Mu WanQing pour some green powder out of the porcelain flask to SiKong Xuan as the Kid Elder's magical medicine but did not know whether or not it could stop bleeding. So he popped open one of the boxes and was immediately engulfed by a faint fragrance. The box was filled with blush. The second box was half filled with a white powder and the third box had in it a yellow powder. He put both of them up to his nose and sniffed them. The white powder was odorless but the yellow powder was so spicy that it made him sneeze from just one sniff.

"This is either the blood clotter or a deadly poison." He thought to himself. "Better be on the cautious side, it would be terrible if I misused it." So he poked Mu WanQing for a while until she slowly cracked open her eyes.

Ecstatic, he asked: "Miss Mu, which of these medicines stops bleeding?"

"The red one." She replied before closing her eyes again.

"The red one?" Duan Yu asked to make sure, but she did not reply. Duan Yu was quite puzzled, that red one was clearly blush, how could it stop bleeding? But since she said so, then might as well try it out; it's can't be any worse than applying poison onto the wound.

So he tore off a bit of the cloth around the wound, scooped up a bit of the blush with his finger and applied it onto the wound. When his fingers touched the wound, Mu WanQing, even though she's half-conscious, twitched from the pain.

"It's ok, it's ok." Duan Yu comforted. "Let's stop the bleeding first."

Strangely, the blush turned out to be incredibly effective. Soon, the bleeding significantly slowed down and stopped. After a while, a yellowish liquid oozed out from the wound.

"Making blood clotters like blush," Duan Yu thought out loud to himself, "girls these days are really something."

Only now did he finally calm down from all that work and he noticed that the other side of the gorge had quieted down.

"Are they really going to come up from the bottom of the gorge?" He wondered. Crawling to the edge of the cliff, he looked down and his heart began beating fast again. As he expected, he saw about a dozen or so men slowly climbing down the cliff facing him towards the bottom of the gorge. Even though the gorge is deep, there's still a bottom, and as soon as they reach it they could climb up this side. From the looks of it, they would arrive in about five or six hours.

Although the outlook was grim, he couldn't just give in and wait here to die. Looking around again, he realized that they were on the very top of a peak with sheer cliffs on three sides and a river on the other. He sighed and dragged Mu WanQing underneath a rock that was jutting out of the ground so she wouldn't catch anything from the cold mountain winds. After that, he started to gather rocks and put them by the very edge of the cliff. Luckily, there were all kinds of rocks all over the place and he was able to quickly gather quite an impressive mound. Satisfied with his own work, he sat down at Mu WanQing's side to rest himself.

As soon as he sat down he felt the sand on the ground rumbling, rather painfully, against his bare skin. His thoughts began to wander as he compared his situation with a particular line of teaching he had read in the Book of Changes. Somehow his thoughts led him to compare himself to a large goat.

{ Note: Here Duan Yu's specific thoughts were filled with old Chinese terms that uses characters that aren't even in dictionaries anymore. I'm sorry I could not translate his

thoughts word for word, but the gist of it was that he somehow compared himself to a large goat.}

Having not slept at all last night, he was as tired as he could ever remember being. After analyzing a couple more phrases from the Book of Changes, he was just about to fall asleep. However, knowing that enemies were approaching, he did not dare to let himself sleep. As wave after wave of the fragrance from Mu WanQing hit him, he suddenly realized that when he put his fingers underneath her nose to make sure that she was alive he had actually removed her veil and saw her face. But he was too occupied with her well-being at the time to pay attention to what she looked like. And now for no good reason he couldn't bring himself to remove the veil to take another look. Thinking back some more, he seemed to remember that her skin was white and smooth, at least nothing like her claim of having a pot-covered face.

At this time Mu WanQing was still passed out, if he quietly removed her veil again there was no way she would know. He wanted to, but did not dare to. His mind was racing: "I'm living and dying with her right here, most probably dying actually. If I don't even know what she looked like before I die, then won't my death be a little too much in vain?"

But deep down he was also afraid that she might actually turn out to really have a pot-covered face: "If she wasn't just incredibly ugly, why would she always have a veil on and not let anyone else see her real face? This particular miss's actions are so rough and rash, she probably has no relation whatsoever with the words 'beautiful and elegant'."

He just could not make up his mind. In trying to make up his mind, he just got sleepier and sleepier until he actually fell asleep.

After what seemed like forever, a crackling sound suddenly woke him up. Running to the edge of the cliff, he was able to see five or six men climbing up the cliff. Luckily,

the cliff was so steep that their progress slowed to almost a halt. Duan Yu's mind was screaming to himself: "Wow that was close! Too close!"

He picked up a rock and threw it over the edge. "Stop! Or else I'm going to let you guys have it!" He shouted.

From his position above them, he could easily hit them with rocks; and because the climbers were still about one hundred meters away from him, they could not hit him with their projectiles. When they heard him, they stopped, but only for a second before they resumed climbing, only this time they were zig-zagging and temporarily hiding behind certain rocks. In a flurry, Duan Yu tossed five or six rocks over the edge in a row. Two screams went up as two men were hit and fell to their deaths. Only then did the rest of the climbers realize the predicament they were in and began to scramble down the cliff. One of them was too hasty in his retreat, lost his footing, and also fell to his death.

Duan Yu had studied Buddhism with highly respected monks ever since he was little. He even refused to learn kungfu. So this was the first time he had taken a life, and it scared his face white. He had intended to just scare those climbers away, but ended up killing two men and indirectly causing the death of another. Even though he knew that if he didn't do what he did and the climbers made it to the top, both Mu WanQing and him would have been dead, he still could not help feeling terrible.

He just stood there, completely still from the shock, for a long while before he returned to where Mu WanQing was. She had sat up and was leaning up against the rock. Surprised and ecstatic, Duan Yu said: "Miss Mu, you... you are ok now!"

Mu WanQing did not reply. She just stared at him from behind the mask, there was viciousness in that stare.

"You just sit there and rest for a bit, I'm going to get some water for you." Duan Yu said in a soft voice.

"Were people trying to climb up to here?" She asked.

Tears rolled out of Duan Yu's eyes. He wiped them off with his sleeve and replied in between his sobs: "I accidentally killed two of them and... and scared... scared another one to fall."

"So?" Mu WanQing asked, not knowing what to make of his crying.

"The Heavens want us to live, I... I killed for no good reason, I deserve to die." Duan Yu replied between sobs. "Those three men could have parents, wives, or kids, they would surely be destroyed when they hear the news. How... how could I have done this to them? To their families?"

"You got them too." Mu WanQing said with a sneer.

"I have parents, but no wives or kids." Duan Yu replied, not understanding what she was trying to say.

Mu WanQing's eyes suddenly flashed a very peculiar look, but only for a brief instant before turning back to the cold, steely look they had before. "After they make it up the cliff, are they going to kill you? Are they going to kill me?" She demanded.

"Most likely."

"Hmph! You would prefer being killed over killing others?"

"If it was just me, then I would never kill anyone. But... but I can't let them hurt you." Duan Yu said after he thought about it for a bit.

"Why?" Mu WanQing fiercely demanded.

"You saved my life before, I have to save yours too."

"I'm going to ask you a question, and if you don't tell me the whole truth, the arrows in my sleeve are going straight through your throat!" She lifted her right arm slightly off the ground as she said that so it aimed towards Duan Yu.

"So those arrows of yours that killed all those people came from your sleeve." Duan Yu observed.

"Idiot," Mu WanQing shouted. "Are you or are you not going to listen to me?"

"You are not going kill me, why should I listen to you?"

"If you really get on my nerves, I very well could decide to kill you," Mu WanQing replied viciously. "Now tell me, did you see my face?"

Duan Yu shook his head: "No."

"Really?" Mu WanQing asked. Her voice was getting lower and her forehead was covered in sweat, obviously she was using up all strength to sustain this conversation. Nevertheless, the tone of her voice was still very threatening.

"Why should I lie to you? You can't just not believe everything I say." Duan Yu replied.

"You could have done it while I was passed out."

"I was too occupied with that wound on your back, it didn't even cross my mind."

Angry, Mu WanQing's breathing became labored as she demanded: "You... saw the skin on my back? You... you applied herbs to my back?"

"Yes," Duan Yu answered. "That blush of yours works wonders. I can't believe it's actually a blood-clotter."

"Could you come here help me sit up a little?" Mu WanQing suddenly asked.

"Alright, you shouldn't talk so much. Just rest until you are alright and then we can try and find a way to escape." Duan Yu said as he walked over to her side to give her a hand.

His hands was just about to touch her arm when suddenly, "Smack!" He was slapped so hard on his left cheek that it left felt as if it was on fire. Although Mu WanQing was injured, her moves still packed quite a punch.

Duan Yu, caught totally off guard, was dizzy and got spun in a complete circle. Covering his cheeks with his hands, he angrily shouted: "Why... why did you hit me?"

"How... how dare you? How dare you... touch my skin? How dare you... look at my back...." Mu WanQing shouted back in equal fury before passing out from both anger and exhaustion.

Shocked, Duan Yu completely forgot about that slap as he scrambled forward and got her to sit back up again. Only then did he notice that blood was once again spilling out of the wound on her back; turned out that she had put too much force into that slap, and the wound that was just beginning to heal ripped open again.

"Miss Mu got mad at me for touching her skin, but if I don't do anything, she would surely die from blood loss. Oh well, I guess the worse that could happen is getting slapped a couple more times." Duan Yu decided.

So he ripped off a piece of his shirt and began wiping away the blood around the wound. But with her snow-white and baby smooth skin in his sights coupled with wave after wave of her fragrance, he did not dare to look more than he had to as he hurriedly applied the blush onto the wound again.

This time it didn't take as long for Mu WanQing to come to. As soon as she opened her eyes, she shot a murderous look at Duan Yu, who, scared that she might hit him again, was standing a good distance away.

"You... again...." Mu WanQing said, knowing that Duan Yu re-applied the blush from the coolness she felt around the wound.

"I... I can't just let you die," Duan Yu argued.

Too exhausted to respond, all Mu WanQing could do was try and bring her labored breathing under control.

Suddenly noticing the sound of water running to his left, Duan Yu walked over and found a small but clean mountain creek. He bent down, washed his hands, and took a good sip of the water. Then he cupped some water in his hands, walked over to Mu WanQing's side, and said: "Come on, drink some water, you'll feel better."

Mu WanQing hesitated, but losing all that blood had made her incredibly thirsty, so she pulled back a little corner of her veil, revealing her mouth.

It was high noon at that moment and the sun shone down directly onto her face. Duan Yu noticed that her chin was quite small, her face was white and, just like her back, smooth as silk, with not even a trace of a blemish was to be found. Her cherry-like mouth sat cutely in the middle and, with her lips quite thin, revealed two rows of jade-like teeth. He suddenly realized: "She... she's actually incredibly beautiful!"

Some of the water had leaked through the cracks between his fingers and spilled onto Mu WanQing's face. To Duan Yu, they looked like little dew drops on the morning flowers. Taken by surprise by the whole situation, he did not dare to look anymore and turned his head away.

Mu WanQing finished the water he had brought her and said: "More, go get me more."

Duan Yu obeyed her and got her more water. After a total of three trips, her thirst was finally quenched.

Duan Yu, being extra safe, crawled to the edge of the cliff and looked around. He saw seven or eight men standing on the other side of the gorge looking over on this side with bows and arrows in hand. Looking down the face of the cliff, he saw that nobody else was trying to climb up. But knowing that the enemy wouldn't just give up, he figured they would eventually figure out another way to attack.

He shook his head, drank some more water from the creek, then washed off some of Mu WanQing's blood that had spilled onto his face. Then it occurred to him: "The cure for Intestine Fragmenter! Not that it would really make a difference now, but I guess it couldn't hurt to use it."

So he took out the little porcelain bottle out from inside his shirt, dumped some of the powder onto his hand, and swallowed it with a mouthful of mountain water. He thought: "This medicine tastes horrible, but at least it's better than how that Intestine Fragmenter tasted. Ay, who knew Miss Mu is that beautiful. Hopefully this situation is like it's written: 'lose horse', 'worry not for evil'."

{ Again, Duan Yu is quoting from a book that he read, most likely the Book of Changes, which seemed to be his favorite. }

But then he thought: "There's water here, but no food. Our enemy don't have to get up here, they just have to wait a few days and the two of us will die of starvation."

Depressed and showing it on his face, he returned to Mu WanQing's side and commented: "Too bad there isn't any fruit on this hill, or else we can at least pick them to combat hunger."

"Useless talk!" Mu WanQing replied. "All that talking isn't going to help us is it?"

After a pause, she suddenly asked: "How did you meet that little girl of the Zhongs?"

Duan Yu told her, as good as he can remember it, how he first met Zhong Ling in Sword Lake Palace, how he was made fun of, and how she came to his rescue, etc., etc.

Mu WanQing did not utter a word during the entire story. After he finished, she snickered: "You don't know any kungfu, yet you keep on meddling in other people's business in the martial world, are you tired of living or something?"

"I got myself into this mess, so I deserve whatever I have coming, nothing to say about that. But I just don't feel right about dragging miss into this as well." Duan Yu replied, rather apologetically.

"What are you talking about? These enemies are mine, if you didn't exist they would still gang up on me wouldn't they? If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have to worry about you... I... I would be able to go out in style and die in battle, at least it would be much better than starving to death here."

Mu WanQing paused after she said "worry about you" because she felt rather foolish to actually saying that she worried about him and was blushing feverishly. Luckily the veil covered her face and Duan Yu attributed the change in her voice to the fact that she, being exhausted, was finding

it difficult to speak. So he tried to comfort her: "Miss, just rest a couple of days for your back to recover. Then when you try and bust out, they might not be able to stop you."

Mu WanQing let out a cold laugh and said: "Easy for you to say, is it possible for this wound of mine to heal in a couple of days? There really is quite a lot of them out there...."

Suddenly, from the other side of the gorge, there came a howl so loud that it shook the entire mountain. Mu WanQing snapped up, grabbed Duan Yu's arm for support, and asked in a shaking voice: "Who... who is that? How can his inner strength be that strong?"

The howl circled the mountain endlessly, lasting for what seemed like forever. With all the echoes it caused in the mountains, it was literally like an army of ghosts, crying and screaming upon their return to claim their lost souls. Even though it was in the middle of the day, Duan Yu suddenly felt as if the entire sky darkened right in front of him. Only after an eternity did the howls and noises gradually cease.

"This guy's kungfu is so good that there's no possible way for me to beat him." Mu WanQing said. "Just... just leave, don't worry about me anymore."

"Miss Mu, is that how you think of me? I, Duan Yu, might be 'a piece of wood', but I'm not that kind of a person." Duan Yu answered with a smile.

Mu WanQing stared at him for a long time, stared at him with what actually seemed like care and worry. "That 'piece of wood' business was just me messing with you, don't worry about it." She said in a gentle and tender voice. "Why do you want to die with me? What... what good would it do? Just run away and think of me once in a while, and that would be good enough for me."

Duan Yu had never heard her talk like this before. Once that howl went up, she seemed to have turned into a different person. It's just that she was so used to talking in that cold, uncaring way that all those nice and sweet things

came out rather stiff and awkward for her. He had to smile: "Miss Mu, why couldn't you talk like this all the time? You were really like a beautiful and elegant lady just then."

Mu WanQing humphed and, suddenly turning vicious, demanded: "How do you know whether or not I'm pretty? You saw my face didn't you?"

Her fist tightened like an iron clamp around Duan Yu's arm.

"When I got you water, I saw half of your face." Duan Yu finally said with a sigh. "But just that half of your face is enough to make you a rare beauty."

Despite Mu WanQing's personality, she's still just a girl. So she couldn't help but feel good when he complimented her looks. Besides, she had been wearing that veil for so long that nobody had ever complimented on her looks before, all anybody ever noticed was her kungfu. Feeling warm and fuzzy, she loosened her grip and instructed: "Go find a cave or something to hide in. No matter what you see, don't come out. He'll be here any minute now."

Quite taken aback by that revelation, Duan Yu jumped up and shouted: "I can't let him get up here!"

He ran over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. His eyes suddenly blurred as he saw what looks to be a man in yellow making his way up the face of the cliff at an incredible speed. The cliff was almost a sheer drop, yet this man was moving as if he was on flat ground.

Terrified, Duan Yu shouted down: "Hey! Stop! Or else I'll start throwing rocks down at you!"

That man let out a huge laugh and actually began to move even faster.

Seeing that he was making his way up the mountain that fast, yet not wanting to kill again, Duan Yu picked up a rock and threw it a couple of meters to the side of the man. The rock wasn't really that big, but after dropping such a long distance, it carried quite a force with it. "You see that? Had I

hit you, you would be dead by now! Turn around!" Duan Yu shouted.

"Stinking bastard! Don't want to live anymore? How dare you greet me so rudely?" That man let out a cold snicker and said.

Seeing him moving even faster, Duan Yu had no other choice. He picked up a couple more rocks and aimed it at the man's head. Closing his eyes so he didn't have to watch the man die, he dropped the rocks. All he heard was the sound of the rocks falling through the air and the man's loud laugh. Confused, Duan Yu opened his eyes and saw that the man was still alright and the rocks had already fallen past him. Now Duan Yu was terrified. In a near panic, he grabbed a whole pile of rocks and dumped the entire load onto the man at once.

That man waited until the rocks were almost about to hit his head, and then he reached up with a hand and casually pushed them out of the way. Once in a while he would give a little hop sideways and avoid a potentially troublesome rock. Duan Yu dumped about thirty or so rocks as fast as he could at him, but all he was able to do was slow the man's progress a bit. Not being able to do a thing as he got closer and closer, so close in fact that Duan Yu could just about make out the man's frightening face, Duan Yu scrambled back to Mu WanQing's side and shouted: "Miss... Miss Mu, that... that man's too strong, let's get out of here!"

"Too late," Mu WanQing coldly replied.

Duan Yu was just about to reply when a huge force suddenly hit him from behind, sending him flying. He fell into a little group of trees and was almost completely knocked out. Luckily, he had landed into an area that was literally covered with little trees, thus he only suffered minor scratches on his face and not much more. By the time he had gotten up from the fall, that person was already standing at Mu WanQing's side.

Duan Yu scrambled up and positioned himself in front of Mu WanQing, blocking the man's path. "Who are you? And why are you trying to hurt others?" He asked.

Mu WanQing was caught completely by surprise. "Ru... Run! Get out of here!" She shouted at him.

That man let out a hearty laugh and said: "Too late to run away now! Your old man here is the Divine Croc of the South Seas; in terms of kungfu, I rank number... number... hehe I'm sure you two kids have heard about me, right?"

Duan Yu's heart was pounding, but he forced himself to not panic and began sizing up the man in front of him. The first thing he noticed was his unusually large head. Two rows of white and menacing teeth can be seen in his huge mouth, yet his eyes were unexpectedly small and round, like two peas. Still, the force in his stare was positively menacing as they looked Duan Yu up and down over and over again, causing Duan Yu to shudder involuntarily. He had an average built, but his legs were skinny, almost to the bone. He carried a beard that looked as if it was made out of iron, every single strand was stiff and straight. Despite the beard, it was impossible to tell how old he was. He had on a silk robe which drooped down to his knees. The silk was of a very high quality and expensive, yet the pants he had on was made of very cheap and rough material and was so dirty that it was difficult to make out its original color. His fingers were long and pointy, which reminded Duan Yu of chicken paws. At first glance, Duan Yu had thought that this man was just indescribably ugly, but the more he looked at him, the more he felt that it was only because the man's looks, built, and even clothing just simply didn't match.

"Come here," Mu WanQing instructed. "Stand beside me."

"You... you sure he won't harm you?" Duan Yu asked.

Mu WanQing let out a little cold laugh and said: "With that little bit of stuff you know, what chance do you have of stopping 'the Divine Croc of the South Seas'?"

Despite her tone of voice, Mu WanQing couldn't help but be touched that Duan Yu would actually put himself in danger to protect her.

Duan Yu figured that she was right. If this man wanted to get him out of the way, all he had to do was simply lift his arm. So it was probably best not to anger him yet. Thus he backed up until he was even with Mu WanQing and said: "Oh, so you are 'The Divine Croc of the South Seas' who's kungfu is ranked number... number... that is... I have much admired your famed and illustrious name. I have humbly been able to meet several brave men and heroes these last couple of days, and I have to say that your amazing kungfu has to be the best among them. Not one of those rocks I tossed down hit! Sir, your kungfu is truly amazing."

"Even though I'm brown-nosing, his kungfu really is something else, so all this kissing up isn't that bad." DuanYu reasoned.

Divine Croc of the South Seas was on cloud nine from all the praise that Duan Yu tossed at him. So he let out another, rather stiff, laugh and replied: "Your kungfu might not be anything to brag about, but at least you know what's good when you see it. I guess I'll let you live just for that. Now get out of my way."

Ecstatic, Duan Yu suggested: "Then could you, sir, please let Miss Mu go too?"

Divine Croc's eyes bugged out, reached out with one arm, and gave Duan Yu a shove that pushed him back several steps before he was able to recover his balance. In a heavy and vicious voice, he said: "Take one more step forward, and your old man here is going to kill you!"

"Men like him is capable of doing anything. I better just stay here for now." Duan Yu thought to himself.

Divine Croc opened his eyes wide and sized Mu WanQing up several times before asking: "Did you kill 'Little Devil' Sun SanBa?"

"Yes," Mu WanQing replied.

"Did you know that he was my beloved disciple?"

Duan Yu was screaming on the inside: "Oh bad! This is bad! Miss Mu killed his beloved disciple, that's not the kind of thing that you can just make it go away. Even if I kiss up to him ten times as much it would still be of no use."

"Not when I killed him, but I did find out several days later." Mu WanQing replied.

"Are of scared of me?" Divine Croc of the South Seas asked.

"No!"

Divine Croc let out a thunderous roar of fury that shook the entire mountain. "How could you be not scared of me? How... how dare you! Who's protection are you hiding under?" He demanded.

"Yours!" Mu WanQing replied coldly.

Divine Croc was taken aback for a moment by this. "Damn rubbish! What do you mean you are hiding under my protection?"

"You are one of the 'Four Arch-Villains.'" How could a man at such a lofty position stoop so low as to attack a severely wounded girl?" Mu WanQing's reply actually seemed to include a bit of praise.

Divine Croc paused a bit in surprise before bursting out laughing heartily: "That's a pretty good point!"

Upon hearing the words "Four Arch-Villains," Duan Yu suddenly realized that this man was actually a friend of Zhong Ling's father, Zhong WanChou. Hoping to get to a better position using Zhong WanChou's name, he cut in right as he heard the man make that last comment.

"Every where in the martial world you hear people say that the Divine Croc of the South Seas is a great hero and a brave man. Not only that, some people say that Divine Croc wouldn't even fight if his opponent was just a single man. The more foes he fights at one time, the happier he is. This, obviously, shows how great of a fighter he really is."

Divine Croc was smiling so much as he was listening to that that his round eyes became just two slits. Nodding profusely, he asked: "That's another pretty good point, whom did you hear that from?"

"No Measure Sword Sect's head of their East Faction Zuo ZiMu, head of their West Faction Xin ShuangQing, the head of the Divine Farmer Clan SiKong Xuan, the master of Thousand-Calamities Valley Zhong WanChou, his wife Gan BaoBao, and then there's Grandma Rui and Grandma Ping from just south of the Yangtze. Hehe, too many, too many. I can't remember all of them."

Divine Croc nodded and said: "You, little fella, is quite a character eh? Next time you hear somebody praising me, better remember his name for me, ok?" Turning to Mu WanQing, he inquired: "I heard that your kungfu is pretty good, how did you get hurt so bad? Who did it?"

Looking weak and wronged, Mu WanQing replied: "There were four of them and they ganged up on me. I'm not like you, the more enemies the better, I can't handle that many of them."

"Yet another good point. Four fighters ganging up on one girl? Have they got no shame?" Divine Croc replied.

"That's right!" Duan Yu immediately cut in. "A real hero wouldn't even fight if there was just one foe, where did they get off fighting four against one? It's a shame that you, sir, wasn't there, or else you would grab one in each hand and snap the bones in half."

"No! No! No!" Divine Croc shook his head vehemently.

Every time he shook his head and said the first "No!", Duan Yu's heart skipped a beat, he said three straight "No!" in a row, so Duan Yu's heart skipped three straight beats. He could not figure out where exactly he had said something wrong.

"I don't snap their bones in half. I just go 'Crack!' and snap their neck. Snapping their bones doesn't necessarily kill then, no fun in that. But snap their necks and those sons

of turtles will die. Don't believe me? Then let me snap your neck and you'll see." Divine Croc continued.

"I believe! I believe you! No need to prove it to me." Duan Yu immediately replied. Then he suddenly remembered that one of the servants in the Zhong family was welcoming a "Yue Number Two" of the Four Arch-Villains who, because he mistakenly said "Yue Number Three" and called him a "great man," had his neck snapped by the man. So the man in front of him must be Yue Number Two.

"That's right! You are as evil as evil can get. Some people call you Yue Number Two, I say you should be Yue Number One. When Yue Number One grabs somebody's neck, that man is dead for sure!" Duan Yu praised.

Happy beyond words, Divine Croc grabbed Duan Yu's shoulders and shook him out of joy. "That's right. That's so right! You are a pretty smart little fella, actually know that I'm as evil as evil can get. Yue Number One is out of the question, Number Two is pretty good anyway."

Duan Yu felt as if his shoulders were about to be squeezed into little pieces. Nevertheless, he forced a smile on his face and said: "Says who? I say the words 'Yue Number One' without the slightest of doubts in my heart."

"Duan Yu, Duan Yu. What won't you do to save Miss Mu? Kissing up like a coward, where are all those morals you got from all those books now?" He thought to himself. "But if it was just for me, then I would never say anything like this. Scared of death, what kind of a man would I be then? It's only because I'm trying to save Miss Mu do I force myself to stoop down to such a level. It is written in the Book of Changes: 'If going along helps those who are true, then real gentlemen should do it'. That's the real logic behind conquering the hard with a soft touch." Having reasoned himself to that point, he felt a lot better.

Divine Croc let go of Duan Yu's shoulders and turned to Mu WanQing: "Yue Number Two is a real man and would never hurt a girl...."

"He still wouldn't claim to the title of Number One. Wonder how evil that Number One guy is." Duan Yu thought to himself, but afraid of upsetting him, he kept quiet and did not ask.

Divine Croc continued: "... Come next time when you have got helpers, then I'll kill you. I can't kill you today, but I have to ask you a question. I heard that you said you had always worn the veil so as to not allow anyone to see your face, and if anyone saw your face, then you'll have to either kill him or marry him. Is this true?"

This was a complete shock to Duan Yu, and then he saw Mu WanQing nod, which made this whole matter even more confusing and shocking to him.

"Why the hell did you make up such a messed up rule?" Divine Croc asked.

"That is what I swore in front of my master. If I didn't, my master wouldn't have taught me kungfu." Mu WanQing replied.

"And who the hell is your master? Talk about messed up! Wow, ridiculous stuff, just ridiculous!" Divine Croc replied.

"Out of respect to your seniority, I have been very polite towards you. But you are wrong to talk about my master in such a rude manner." Mu WanQing replied with pride.

Divine Croc reached out and struck a huge piece of rock that was sitting right beside him with his palm. Immediately the rock shattered, sending small pieces flying off and hitting Duan Yu, giving him quite a sting. "How could a person be that good at kungfu? If that had hit a person, there's no way the person would survive." Duan Yu thought to himself as he turned and looked at Mu WanQing.

But Mu WanQing kept her stare, not showing the slightest hint of fear, not even a blink.

Divine Croc traded stares with her for a long time before finally breaking the standstill: "Alright, I guess you have a point. Who is your master? Who is so... hehe... such... hehe...."

"Master is known as the 'Guest of Secluded Valley'." Mu WanQing answered.

"'Guest of Secluded Valley'? Never heard of it, must not be anyone important!" Divine Croc mumble to himself while trying to recall where he had heard of the name before.

"My master lives alone in a secluded valley, that's the reason for the name 'Guest of Secluded Valley'. How could that compare with the famous name of yours?"

"Another good point." Divine Croc nodded before suddenly raising his voice in a shout: "My disciple Sun SanBa, did he see your face? Is that why you killed him?"

"You know what kind of a person your disciple is," Mu WanQing replied coldly. "Had he even learned a tenth of your kungfu, then I wouldn't have been able to kill him."

"Another good point." Divine Croc nodded. But his thoughts turned to the fact that his sect had always, by rule and tradition, passed their kungfu down through one disciple and one disciple only. The death of Sun SanBa meant that more than ten years of hard work in his teaching Sun SanBa had been completely in vain. The more he thought about it, the madder he got until he finally screamed: "TaMaDe!"

Seeing his complexion suddenly turn into a burnt yellow color and his expression turn animalistic, both Mu WanQing and Duan Yu were scared, and that was before they heard him scream: "I must avenge my disciple!"

"Second Master Yue, you already said that you wouldn't hurt her." Duan Yu immediately cut in, bumping him up to a more respectable "Second Master Yue". "Besides, it's probably for the best that your disciple died. He couldn't even learn a tenth of your kungfu, had he lived, he could have lost you a lot of face."

"Yet another good point. I can't afford to lose any face." Divine Croc nodded and turned to Mu WanQing. "Did my disciple see your face?"

"No!" Mu WanQing said, grinding her teeth together.

"Alright, so that my disciple may rest in peace, I'm going to take a look and see whether or not you look like an ugly monster or a beautiful goddess."

This gave Mu WanQing the scare of her life. She had sworn in front of her master, if Divine Croc removed her veil by force, there was no way she could kill him, but how could she marry him? Almost panicking, she replied: "You are a famous man in the martial world, how could you stoop so low to do such an evil thing?"

"I'm as evil as evil can get, the more evil the action the better. I only have one rule in my life, and that's never kill anyone who can't fight back. Other than that, everything goes, nothing is off limits. So why don't you just be a good girl, take off the veil yourself, and save me the trouble." Divine Croc replied with a sneer.

"You really have to see my face?" Mu WanQing asked, her voice was shaking.

Growing impatient, Divine Croc threatened: "If you keep on stalling, not only am I going to take off your veil, I'm going to rip off all your clothes too. I said I won't snap your neck, but snapping your arms and legs aren't out of the question is it?"

"I can't kill him, so the only way left is suicide." Mu WanQing decided.

She turned to Duan Yu and shot him a look, telling him to run. Duan Yu shook his head. With a little quiver of his beard, Divine Croc reached out with those chicken-claw like hand of his, trying to grab Mu WanQing's veil.

Mu WanQing flicked her sleeve. "Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!" Three small arrows shot out with lightning quickness and hit Divine Croc's belly. But with a pop, each of the arrows fell harmlessly down to the ground, it was as if he had on some kind of armor underneath his shirt. With another twitch, Mu WanQing shot out three more poisonous arrows, two at his chest and one headed toward his face. As if they hit a hard rock, the two arrows flying towards his chest fell down onto

the ground. The third arrow was just about to hit his face when Divine Croc reached up with his middle finger and, with a gentle flick, the arrow disappeared from sight.

Mu WanQing took out her sword and brought it up to her neck. However, because of her severe wounds, she was not able to move fast enough as Divine Croc, with one swift move, took the sword out of her hand and threw it onto the ground. With a cold laugh, he said: "My rule is only 'Never kill anyone who can't fight back'. You shot six arrows at me, so you made the first move. I'm going to take a look at your face and then kill you. You made the first move, so you can't accuse me for breaking my rule."

"No! You are wrong!" Duan Yu suddenly shouted.

"What!" Divine Croc turned his head towards Duan Yu.

"You call yourself a real man, how could you bully a severely wounded girl?"

"She just shot six poisonous arrows at me, didn't you see that? This is a severely wounded girl bullying a real man, not a real man bullying a severely wounded girl."

"No, you are still wrong."

"Bullshit! What do you mean still wrong?" Divine Croc shouted in anger.

"Your rule is seven words, 'Never kill anyone who can't fight back', right?"

"That's right!" Divine Croc's eyes looked as if they were going to pop out.

"Can those seven words be changed?"

"My rules, so of course they can't be changed!" Divine Croc answered impatiently.

"Not one word?"

"Not even half a word!"

"If it's changed, then what?"

"Then I'm a tortoise son of a turtle!"

"Ok, very good! You haven't hit Miss Mu, yet Miss Mu tried to hit you with arrows, that's not 'fighting you', that's 'striking first'. If you hit her, in her condition, there is no way

that she could fight back. That's why she tried to ambush you, because she can't fight back. If you killed her, then you have changed your rule, and if you change your rule, then you are a tortoise son of a turtle."

Duan Yu had been reading Confucius and Buddhist books ever since he learned how to read, and had analyzed all those ambiguous saying in those books down to the bone. Sayings such as "Is isn't, but have not to", and "White horse is no horse, hard rock is no rock", he analyzed and thought about them until there was nothing left to think about anymore. That's why at this crucial moment, he was able to just grab a hold of Divine Croc's rule and run with it.

Divine Croc let out a furious howl and grabbed Duan Yu by the shoulders.

"How dare you call me a tortoise son of a turtle?" He shouted as he was about to bring his palm down on Duan Yu's head.

"If you change your rule, only then are you a tortoise son of a turtle!" Duan Yu shouted back in a hurry. "If you don't change your rules, then you won't be a tortoise son of a turtle! Whether or not you are a tortoise son of a turtle is completely up to you."

Seeing that even though his life hung by the thinnest of threads, Duan Yu was still shouting "tortoise son of a turtle" non-stop. Mu WanQing knew that Divine Croc would undoubtedly explode in anger and break his neck. Suddenly overwhelmed with sadness, tears filled her eyes as she turned away, not wanting to watch any further.

But unexpectedly, those few words stopped Divine Croc in his tracks. "If I break his neck, then wouldn't that be killing someone who couldn't fight back? Doesn't that make me a tortoise son of a turtle?" He thought to himself.

Staring at Duan Yu with that pair of small eyes of his, he gradually tightened his grip. Soon, Duan Yu's bones were creaking, hurting him so much that he almost fainted.

"Come on! Kill me! I can't fight back!" Duan Yu shouted at the top of his lungs.

"I'm not going to fall for that!" Divine Croc replied. "You really want me to be a tortoise son of a turtle don't you?"

As he said that, Divine Croc lifted Duan Yu off the ground and slammed him down hard back onto the ground. Duan Yu temporarily blacked out from the impact before recovering to feel as if all of his internal organs had exploded.

"I'm not going to fall for that! I'm not going to kill you two little devils!" Divine Croc mumbled to himself before suddenly reaching out and grabbing the green silk cape that Mu WanQing was wearing.

With a loud rip, he tore it off. Mu WanQing let out a shocked yell as she instinctively shrank back. Divine Croc merely raised his arm up and tossed the cape aside. The cape caught the wind and started to fly off. Like a giant lotus leaf, it gently glided over the edge of the cliff and into the raging currents of the LanCang River. "If you don't take off your veil now, I'm going to rip off your shirt next!" Divine Croc said with a sinister smile.

"Come here," Mu WanQing gestured towards Duan Yu, who limped over to her side as quickly as he could.

Mu WanQing turned towards him so as to face away from Divine Croc. "You are the first man in this world to see my face." She said gently and slowly removed her veil.

Duan Yu's entire body shook. What he saw before him was more elegant than the shiny moon on a cloudless night and more beautiful than the lonesome flower that blossoms in the middle of a blizzard. A beauty fit for legends. The only thing was that her face was incredibly pale, which was most likely due to the fact that she was wearing the veil for such a long time. Even that thin pair of lips lacked color, but to Duan Yu, it just made her seem even more vulnerable and lovely. How could this be the same person be that monster who wouldn't even blink when she killed?

Mu WanQing put her veil down on the ground. "If you want to see my face, you are going to have to ask my husband first." She said to Divine Croc without turning around.

"You are married? Who's your husband?" Divine Croc didn't quite believe what he just heard.

"I swore that if a man ever saw my face, I would either kill him or marry him." Mu WanQing said as she pointed at Duan Yu. "He had already seen my face, and I don't want to kill him. So I can only marry him."

"This... this is...." Duan Yu was rendered completely speechless from this turn of events.

After recovering from the initial shock, the Divine Croc turned to Duan Yu. He sized Duan Yu up and down with those pea like eyes of his, sending chills down Duan Yu's spine as he was afraid that Divine Croc would, in a fit of rage, would snap his neck in an instant. Suddenly, Divine Croc began clicking his tongue over and over again out of excitement. "Amazing! Simply amazing! Quick! Turn around!" He said as his face lit up.

Too scared to disobey him, Duan Yu turned around. "Amazing! Wonderful! You look just like me! You are just like me!" Divine Croc commented.

There was not a thing that he could have said that would have shocked Duan Yu and Mu WanQing more than those five words: "You look just like me". The two of them thought to themselves: "What are you talking about? You are a kungfu master, and ugly. There is not even a similarity, not to mention the words 'just like'?"

Divine Croc practically jumped behind Duan Yu as he proceeded to grab the back of Duan Yu's head, squeeze his arms and legs, and even poke his waist a couple of times. After a couple of pokes and grabs, he cracked open a huge smile: "Just like me! Almost exactly like me!" Grabbing Duan Yu's arm, he continued. "Come on with me!"

"Go with you to where?" Duan Yu asked, completely befuddled.

"Oh just come with me!" Divine Croc replied. "Quick, kowtow! Then beg me to take you on as a disciple. As long as you beg, I will immediately take you in."

"What! This... this...." For the second time in just minutes, Duan Yu was rendered completely speechless by the surprising turn of events.

Divine Croc began jumping around and waving his arms like crazy, as if he had just found the most precious jewel in the world. "Your arms and legs are extraordinarily long, the back of your head is protruding out, and your waist is very soft and flexible; plus you are smart, young, and male. You are truly an amazing specimen for learning kungfu." He turned around as he spoke. "See? This is the back of my head, isn't it just like yours?"

Duan Yu felt the back of his head, it really did seem as if the back of their heads were very alike. Who knew that when he said "You are just like me!" he was only talking about the back of their heads?

Turning back around with the biggest possible smile on his face, Divine Croc continued: "We South Sea Sect had always had this rule, each man can only take one disciple. That dead disciple of mine, 'Little Devil' Sun SanBa, the back of his head was nowhere near as good as yours. So he sucked, couldn't even learn a tenth of my kungfu. It's best that he died, this way is all clean and neat, because I don't have to kill him now so I can take you as a disciple instead."

Duan Yu involuntarily shuddered. He was thinking to himself how cruel this man in front of him was, willing to kill his very own disciple so as to be able to change disciples just because he noticed someone else was better suited for kungfu. Even if he did want to learn kungfu, which he didn't, he would never choose this person to be his master. But if he refused, then disaster would be upon him. Just as he wasn't sure what he should do, Divine Croc suddenly shouted at the

top of his lungs: "What do you think you guys are doing sneaking around like that! Get the hell out here now! Every single one of you!"

A dozen or so people came crawling out of the bushes, among them were Grandma Rui, Grandma Ping, and that swordsman. Since Divine Croc had climbed onto this ledge, Duan Yu had not been able to toss more rocks and thus keep them away. So this group was able to sneak up the cliff as well.

Even though they were holding their breaths and not moving while they were in the bush, they had no chance of escaping Divine Croc's sensitive ears. Because he was so overjoyed at discovering such a spectacular treasure in Duan Yu, he didn't really get angry right away. So he shot a mean look towards Grandma Rui, with a smile still lingering on his face, and shouted: "What are you doing here? Did you come to congratulate your old man here on finding a price disciple?"

"We are here to catch this little whore," Grandma Rui pointed to Mu WanQing and said, "to avenge the deaths of our companions."

"She's my disciple's wife!" Divine Croc yelled back, "How dare you try and capture her? TaMaDe! Get the hell out of here!"

Everyone was speechless as they just stood there, staring at each other.

Duan Yu finally summed up his courage and spoke up: "I can't be your disciple, I already have a master."

This made Divine Croc furious: "Who's your master? How can his kungfu be any better than mine?"

"You probably can't do a single bit of my master's kungfu! The 'Gua-Xiang' and the 'Xi-Ci' of 'Zhou-Yi', do you know anything about them? How about the reasons behind 'Ming-Yi' and 'Wei-Ji'? Can you explain them to me?"

Divine Croc of the South Seas just scratched his head. Gua-Xiang? Xi-Ci? He really never ever heard of any of them.

Ming-Yi? Wei-Ji? For all he knows they really might be some kind of incredible kungfu.

{ Note: Once again, all those things that Duan Yu just quoted are ideas from the Book of Changes. }

Seeing the troubled look on his face, Duan Yu continued: "Looks like you don't know any of these high level stuffs. So, while I'm grateful that you would actually consider me as a disciple, I could only accept it in my thoughts and not in my actions. How about next time I invite my master along and the two of you can duel it out and see who is really better. If you beat him, then I could still ask to be your disciple."

"Alright! Who's your master? It's not like I'm scared of him or something. When do you want this duel to happen?"

Duan Yu only really wanted to ward him off for a while with that line of defense, but unexpectedly, Divine Croc was actually really demanding a duel. He was just in middle of trying to figure out what to say next when a sharp and metallic whistle came piercing through the mountains, apparently originating from very far away. The shrill lasted for an incredible, a disturbingly long amount of time. It was amazing that the person who was blowing the whistle could have such a long breath, as if his breath had no end. At first, what everyone on the ledge noticed was the almost unbearable pitch of the whistle, but the longer they listened the more shocked they became, until all they could do was stare at each other, again.

Divine Croc patted his head some and shouted: "I don't have time to talk to you right now, Big Brother is calling me. When does your master want to fight me? Where at? Well? Come on!"

"This... uh... I... can't really just arrange a fight for my master." Duan Yu stuttered before suddenly turning around and pointing to Grandma Rui: "As soon as you leave, these people will kill the two of us. How will I be able to tell my master then?"

Without even turning around, Divine Croc reached back with his left hand and grabbed that sword-wielding man by the chest. Then, with a simple lean to his left, his right hand fell onto the top of the man's head, his left hand rotated right, his right hand rotated left, and his arms intersected. "Crack!" That man's neck snapped. His eyes stared out behind him as his head softly fell down. The sword in his right hand was half pulled out, which was already amazingly quick; but he still nevertheless died before he even pulled his sword out.

This was the same man, during the fight against Mu WanQing before, whose quickness stood out and was able to knock down those poison arrows that she fired at almost point blank range. But now, against just a simple twist from Divine Croc, he didn't even have a fighting chance. All the spectators were so shocked that they couldn't even move. Divine Croc then casually flicked his arm and tossed the corpse to the side. Three men who were with Grandma Rui suddenly, and simultaneously, let out a huge howl and charged. Divine Croc lifted up his right foot and kicked three times. All three of the men took off and flew over the cliff. The bloodcurdling shrieking came shooting up from the bottom of the cliff and echoed all around the mountains until every hair on Duan Yu's body was standing on its end. Everyone of the group with Grandma Rui was scared out of their wits. "'Crack' and one neck is snapped. Hehe, so much fun!" Divine Croc said with a laugh. "One is not enough, I have to do it again. Whoever gets left behind will get his neck snapped."

Scared beyond description, Grandma Rui, Grandma Ping, and the rest of the people in her group all scrambled to the edge of the cliff as fast as they could and began to climb down.

"Can your master do that?" Divine Croc turned towards Duan Yu with a strange laugh. "If you become my disciple, I would immediately teach you how to do that. Your wife's

kungfu is pretty good, so if she doesn't listen to you, then you can just 'Crack' and snap her neck in half."

Suddenly the metallic shrill picked up again, only this time it was in an endless number of short screeches. "Alright, alright! I'm coming! You and your grandmother, what's the hurry?" Divine Croc yelled at the direction of the whistle, as if the other person could hear him. "Be a good boy and wait here, don't you go anywhere." He instructed Duan Yu before he hurriedly ran to the edge and jumped over the edge.

"That'll surely kill him wouldn't it?" A surprised Duan Yu thought to himself.

So Duan Yu ran to the edge of the cliff and looked down. Divine Croc was making his way down the cliff a huge hop at a time. For every thirty meters or so that he fell, he would just reach out with his hand and push off of the cliff, enabling him to fall another thirty meters or so without hitting anything. Soon, he disappeared among the white clouds that surrounded the cliff.

Duan Yu stuck his tongue out and made a face out of a mixture of surprise, worry, and relief. Nothing else to do, he returned back to Mu WanQing's side. "That was so clever of you Miss, just like that, you had that evil-doer stumped." He said with a smile.

"Stumped?" Mu WanQing was quite puzzled.

"This... well, had Miss not lied and said that I was the first man to see your face, then you would... would...."

"Who lied? I can't go back on something I swore on. From this day forth, you are my husband. But I won't permit you to become his disciple and learn that neck breaking skill of his to use it on me."

Duan Yu was startled for a moment before replying: "You were in danger and were merely stalling, why take it so seriously? How can I be Miss's... Miss's... that... husband?"

Using the rock that she had been leaning on as support, Mu WanQing slowly and shakily stood up. "What? You don't

want me as your wife?" She demanded. "You don't think I'm good enough, is that it?"

"Miss, the most important thing right now is for you to get better. Please don't worry too much about all this talk." Duan Yu replied, figuring that it's best not to anger her even more at this moment.

Mu WanQing took a step forward and slapped him hard on the cheeks. But as she did, her leg suddenly gave out and she lost her balance, falling into him. Duan Yu instinctively wrapped his arms around her and caught her.

Wrapped in his arms, the sudden realization that he was her husband hit Mu WanQing, causing her to feel all warm and fuzzy inside, instantly her anger was gone. "Let me go!" She demanded, blushing hard.

Duan Yu helped her to sit down by that rock again. "She has a weird personality to begin with, and now that she's wounded she's probably confused as well. I guess the best thing to do now is to go along with whatever she says. Didn't the 'Trap' dialogue talk about 'saying without sincerity'? Well, now that I'm 'trapped' here, I might as well go along with 'saying without sincerity' as well. Otherwise, not only will I become that devil of a monster's disciple, I'll turn into this little devil of a girl's spouse. Then wouldn't I, Duan Yu, become a little servant of a devil?" As he thought about this, he couldn't help but crack a laugh at his own reasoning inside.

Having made up his mind to just go along, he said in a tender voice: "Don't be mad. I'm going to get something for you to eat."

"As bare as this ledge is, where are you going to find anything edible?" Mu WanQing replied. "Good thing those guys were all scared off. Let me rest for a bit until I get some strength back. Then I'll carry you down."

"N... no... no!" Duan Yu waved his hand from side to side as fast as he could. "Absolutely no. You can't even walk, how can you carry me?"

"You would rather die than to owe me anything? Darling, even though I, Mu WanQing, is a girl that kills without blinking, I am still capable of sacrificing my life for my husband." She was dead serious and resolute when she said those words.

"Alright, thank you. Why don't you rest up a little first and then we'll worry about the rest. From now on, can you not wear that veil anymore?"

"If you don't want me to, then I won't." Mu WanQing replied as she took her veil off.

Once again, Duan Yu was startled by her beauty. Only this time he was rudely interrupted by an incredibly sharp and shooting pain in his belly that forced him scream out in pain. It felt as if there was a small dagger spinning and dicing inside his belly, chopping his intestines to little pieces. Doubling over, huge beads of sweat began to form on his forehead.

"What... What's the matter?" Mu WanQing was just as shocked.

"That... that Intestine Fragmenter..." Duan Yu replied in between groans.

"Ai-Yo! Didn't you take the remedy?"

"I did!"

"Maybe you didn't take enough." Mu WanQing said as she took the little bottle from inside his shirt and poured out some more powder for him. But seeing no signs of improvement from him, she sat down besides him and tried to comfort him: "Is it getting better?"

Nearly passing out from the pain, Duan Yu replied: "It's getting worse and worse. Maybe that remedy is a fake... fake one."

"How could that SiKong Xuan use poison to hurt people? Once this is over we'll go and kill every single person in that Divine Farmer Clan."

"We... we also gave... gave him the fake medicine. SiKong Xuan's just responding, we... we can't really blame him."

"What do you mean can't blame him? It's not a big deal if we give him some fake medicine, but how could he give us the fake medicine?" As she said this, Mu WanQing wiped off the sweat off of his forehead with her sleeves.

Seeing his ash white face, her heart was suddenly overwhelmed and tears began to fall from her eyes. "You... you can't die." She shakily said between sobs as she leaned down and rubbed her right cheek against his left cheek. "Dar... darling, please don't die."

Duan Yu, being hugged by her like this, had never been this close to a young girl in his life. On his cheek he felt her tender and smooth skin, in his ear he heard her gentle and desperate calls of "Darling", and from his nose he smelled her faint and sweet fragrance. How could he not feel as if he was in heaven? Coincidentally, the pain in his belly seemed to subside just at this moment. Turned out what SiKong Xuan had given him wasn't fake. This is actually because the Intestine Fragmenter, being as incredibly lethal as it is, was just beginning to kick in. Even though the cure had already eliminated most of the poison, a couple waves of almost unbearable pain could not have been avoided. Of course, SiKong Xuan had known this all along, it was just that he was too afraid to bring this up earlier in fear of annoying the Holy Emissaries from the Nimble Vulture Palace.

"Is the pain getting better?" Mu WanQing asked, noticing that he had stopped groaning.

"It is a little better. But... but...." Duan Yu replied.

"But what?"

"If you leave me, it'll probably start hurting again."

Mu WanQing blushed and pushed off of him. "So you were faking it all along." She scolded, in a girlish way.

Duan Yu blush furiously as well. But another pain shot through his belly again, causing him to start groaning again.

Mu WanQing grabbed a hold of his hand: "Darling, if you die, I don't want to live on either. We'll meet again in the afterlife and be husband and wife then."

"No, no!" Duan Yu replied, not wanting her to do anything like that. "First you have to avenge me. Then you'll have to visit and clean my tomb every year. I want you to do that at least thirty...no, forty years. Only then will I rest in peace."

{ It is a Chinese tradition to visit and clean a dead relative or friend's tomb every year on a particular date to pay respects to the dead. }

"You know, you are a really weird person. What difference will it make to you if I visit and clean your tomb once you are dead? It's not like you get anything good out of it."

"But if you die with me, I will get even less out of that. Ok, listen to me. As beautiful as you are, if you just visit and clean my tomb once a year, I would be happy to just catch a glimpse of you in the afterlife. But if you die along with me, we'll all just turn into a pile of white bones, nothing pretty to look at there." Duan Yu replied.

Hearing him praise her, Mu WanQing was happy for a moment. But then she turned to the thought that she had just gave her life to him today and now she was going to watch him die. She couldn't stop the tears from falling once again.

Duan Yu reached over and held her around her waist. Feeling a tender and warm softness around his fingers, a light went on in his head and he lowered his head to kiss her on the lips. It was the first kiss of his life, so he didn't dare to prolong it too much before lifting his head back up and resume staring back at her beautiful face. Sighing, he said: "It's a shame that I won't live too much longer and can't stare at your beautiful face more."

The kiss caused Mu WanQing's heart to beat like crazy, her face blushed crazily as her bashfulness took over. The white face became even more colorful and beautiful because of it. "You are the first man in this world to see my face." She said. "After you die, I will carve up my face so as to not let another man see my real face."

Duan Yu wanted to tell her no, but for some reason, a wave of envy suddenly washed over him as he really did not want any other man to see such a beautiful face. So the words made it to the tip of his tongue but just wouldn't come out. Instead, he asked: "Why did you take such a harsh oath? Such a strange oath, it's kind of... kind of good!"

"You are now my husband, so it shouldn't be a problem for you to know." Mu WanQing replied. "I was an orphan and never knew my father or mother. Once I was born I was abandoned and left in the wild. Luckily, I was saved by my master. She brought me up, took care of me, and taught me martial arts. She told me that all men in this world are liars and if one of them ever saw my face, they would undoubtedly try anything they can come up with to lead me into traps. So ever since I was fourteen, I wore a black veil. I have lived all eighteen years of my life in the mountains with my master."

"Oh, so you are eighteen," Duan Yu cut in, "one year younger than me."

Mu WanQing nodded and continued: "This Spring, a person came to visit us. He was a messenger from my master's martial sister, 'Pretty Medicine Fork' Gan BaoBao."

"'Pretty Medicine Fork' Gan BaoBao?" Duan Yu interrupted her again. "Isn't she Zhong Ling's mom?"

"Right, she's my martial-aunt." Mu WanQing replied before her face suddenly darkened. "I forbid you from thinking about that little devil, Zhong Ling. You are my husband, you can only think about me."

Duan Yu stuck his tongue out a little and made a face.

"What was that for? I'm your wife. So that means I only think of you and you alone. To me, other men are pigs, are dogs, are dirty swines."

"But I can't do that." Duan Yu replied with a smile.

"Why not?" Mu WanQing fiercely demanded with her hands raised, ready to strike.

"My mom, and your master, aren't they all women? How can I pretend that they are dirty swines?"

Mu WanQing was rendered speechless for a long while before finally nodding ever so slightly: "But I won't allow you to keep thinking about that little devil Zhong Ling."

"But I didn't keep thinking about her. You mentioned Madame Zhong, which reminded me of Zhong Ling." Duan Yu argued. "So what did that letter to your master say?"

"I don't know. After Master read the letter, she became very angry and distraught and tore the letter to pieces. Then she told the messenger: 'I understand now, go back.' After he left, Master cried for several days straight, not even eating. I tried to console her, but she wouldn't listen, she wouldn't even tell me why, other than that two women wronged her.

"I said: 'Master, don't be distraught. If those two evil women wronged you, then we'll just kill them.'

"That's right!' Master agreed. So right away the two of us left the mountain to kill those two women. Master then said that she had no idea that all these years that these two women were the cause of all her sorrows, and that luckily Gan BaoBao finally explained it all to her and told her where the two women lived."

"Madame Zhong seemed so innocent and shy, but who knew she would be so sinister and scheming?" Duan Yu thought. "She's using you! She hates those two women herself, but instead she has set your master up to kill them."

"Once we left the mountain," Mu WanQing continued, "Master made me swear that if any man saw my face, if I couldn't kill him, then I would have to marry him. If that man won't take me as his wife, or he leaves me after he marries me, then I have to kill that heartless man myself. If I go back on my word, my master would kill herself as soon as she finds out. My master can go through with anything she says, so this is no empty threat made just to scare me."

Inside, Duan Yu couldn't describe how surprised he was: "All oaths sworn in the world says something to the effect of if I go back on my word, this would happen to me. But her

master actually used her own suicide as a threat, better not let her break his oath."

"My master is like both my mother and father," Mu WanQing continued, "I owe so much to her. How can I not listen and obey her? Besides, she only did this because she was looking out for me. I didn't even think twice, I immediately kneeled and took the oath. The first thing the two of us did when we made it down the mountain was to go to SuZhou to kill the woman named Wang that lived there. But she lived in a really strange place, every way you turn you always end up in this little river bay or something like that. My master and I killed quite a number of that woman's underlings, but we still weren't able to see her. Later on my master suggested that we split up, and if we don't meet up in a month, then we'll head to DaLi separately and meet there because the second woman lived there. But unexpectedly that woman named Wang had a lot of very powerful servants, Grandma Rui and Grandma Ping those two old bags are the leaders of them. I can't beat all of them by myself, so I fought them off the best I can as I made my way towards DaLi and found Martial Aunt Gan. She said that it was best if I stayed with her at her Valley of Ten Thousand Calamities until my master showed up, then we'll all go into DaLi and kill that other woman. But my master wasn't able to make it before Grandma Rui and her gang of servants showed up. You should know all about what happened after that."

She was very tired from talking this much, so she closed eyes and took a break. After a bit, she continued: "At first, I thought you were just like my master said, a liar with no heart and no feelings like all the other men in this world. But after you borrowed Black Rose, you actually came back to warn me about the coming danger, I know that was not easy just by itself. And then when all those servants surrounded me, and even though you didn't know any kungfu, you still

tried to protect me. I... I'm not heartless you know, naturally, I was very grateful."

"Uh-huh," Duan Yu mused. "You dragged me around behind your horse, dragged me through water, and slapped me at the slightest provocation, turns out that it was because you were grateful! Wow! Of course! If you weren't grateful, you would have killed me with an arrow a long time ago."

"When you cared for my wounds, you saw my bare back," Mu WanQing continued, "and I saw your bare bottom. I had already figured that I probably have to marry you anyway. And then Divine Croc of the Southern Seas kept on forcing me and I had no choice but to let you see my face." She stopped and turned to look at Duan Yu, her eyes filled with love and tenderness.

"Can it... can it be that she really developed feelings for me?" the realization finally shot through Duan Yu's mind as he said. "So what if you saw my bare... bare that, don't worry about that. Also, you were in danger just then and had no other choice, in that situation you don't have to follow your oath that closely, do you?"

"I swore to it, how can it be changed?" Mu WanQing shouted. "Do you think that bare bottom of yours look good or something? It was ugly as death! If you don't want to marry me, then come out and say it. That way I can just kill you right now and not worry about breaking my oath."

Duan Yu didn't know how to respond to that. Suddenly, his belly began hurting again, doubling him over once again.

"Say it, are you or are you not going to marry me?" Mu WanQing demanded.

"My... my belly... belly hurts!" Duan Yu groaned.

"Do you or do you not want to be my husband?"

Figuring that with this pain, he couldn't live much longer anyways, Duan Yu decided that there was no point in hurting her before dying and causing her great sadness, nodded

as much as he can with the pain and replied: "I... I'll marry you."

Mu WanQing's finger had wrapped around the arrow-firing trigger within her sleeve. Hearing him say those words, she was overjoyed, making her face look like a newly blossomed flower. Taking her finger off the trigger, she hugged Duan Yu and smiled.

"Darling, let me rub your tummy for you."

"No, no! We are not married yet!" Duan Yu objected. "Men and women... men and women shouldn't... that is... you shouldn't do this."

"Pei! Then why did you kiss me just then?"

"That's because you were so beautiful that I couldn't help myself. Please forgive me!"

"No need to ask for forgiveness," Mu WanQing smiled even wider. "I liked it too when you kissed me."

"She's so innocent and naive, and it's all real. Not like Madame Zhong's fakery. Zhong Ling's so young that her innocence is real too." Duan Yu mused.

"Oh I know! You are starving, that only makes the pain worse." Mu WanQing continued. "Let me go cut off some meat off of that guy for you."

Before Duan Yu's mind registered what she meant, she stood up using the rock for support and looked as if she was about to walk over to that swordsman whose neck Divine Croc had snapped.

So shocked that he forgot about his belly ache, Duan Yu shouted: "Human flesh is inedible. I would rather die than eat that!"

"Why not? When I was with my master, we ate tiger meat and leopard meat. Are you saying that we shouldn't eat all of them?" Mu WanQing was rather confused.

"Of course you can eat tigers and leopards, but not humans!"

"Is human flesh poisonous? I didn't know anything about that."

"It's not poisonous. It's just that you are human, I'm human, and that guy is human too. We can't eat humans!"

"How come? I saw jackals and wolves eat other jackals and wolves when they were hungry all the time."

"That's right. But if we humans eat human, then aren't we no better than those wolves?" sighed Duan Yu.

Mu WanQing had stayed with her master all her life and never had any meaningful contact with another person. Her master was an eccentric character and never talked to her about the world outside. As a result, she was completely clueless about the rules, etiquette, or morals of the world. So at this point, hearing Duan Yu saying that "humans can't eat humans", she could only stare at him with her elegant eyes in confused trust.

"Killing all those people wasn't right of you either. Confucius wrote: 'Do onto others as you would have them do onto you.' If you don't want to be killed then you shouldn't kill others. If others are in trouble, then you should help them. That's what it means to be human."

"But if I was in trouble, would others come and help me? How come that other than my master and you, everyone else I met wants to bully me, harm me, and kill me? If tigers or leopards want to bite me or eat me, I would kill them. If people wanted to kill me, then naturally I would kill them. How is that any different?"

Duan Yu had no answers for her questions. All he could say was: "So you really don't know anything about how the world works."

"You don't know any martial arts, yet you meddle in the matters of the martial world. Seems to me that you don't know that much about how the world works either."

"Can't deny that!" All Duan Yu could do was force a smile and nod in agreement.

Suddenly, Mu WanQing let out a little yelp and jumped into Duan Yu's arms. "He... he's back...."

Duan Yu turned around just in time to see a yellow figure jump up over the edge of the cliff as Divine Croc of the Southern Seas landing on the mountain top.

As soon as he saw Duan Yu, he smiled. "You haven't kowtowed to me and officially become my disciple yet. So I have to be careful. Some shameless dude could come along and steal you from me. Number One said that in everything the world always favors those who make the first move. Only when you actually have the thing you covet should you consider it as yours, else if somebody took it from you, it's much harder to snatch it back. Number One is always correct, I can't beat him, so I got to join him. Hey! Kid, get over here and become my disciple!" Divine Croc ranted.

Noticing how he freely admitted that he lost to "Number One" despite being very competitive, Duan Yu was quite surprised. But the Divine Croc's left eye was swollen and the corner of his mouth split open, Duan Yu had to be convinced that it was "Number One" who had done this to him. Knowing that he could not become his disciple, Duan Yu instead decided to try to change the subject and waste time.

"That was Number One who blew the whistle just then wasn't it? Did you guys have a fight?"

"That's right!"

"Then you must have won and beat Number One black and blue, right?"

"No, not at all," Divine Croc violently shook his head. "His martial arts skills are way better than mine. We haven't met in so many years and I figured that even if I couldn't beat him this time and become Number One of the 'Four Arch-Villains', I would at least be able to last one hundred or two hundred moves with him. But who knew that after three punches and two kicks he had knocked me down for good. So Number One is still his place to take, I'll just settle with being second. But I was still able to land a couple of good kicks on him. He actually said to me: 'Yue Number Three, your kungfu has improved quite a bit.' Number One actually

praised my kungfu, and what Number One says is always correct."

"But you are Number Two, not Number Three," Duan Yu pointed out.

"It's been a long time since we met," Divine Croc's face changed color as he replied. "Number One just said it without thinking. He forgot about it."

"But 'what Number One says is always correct.' How could he mistakenly mis-rank you?"

Unfortunately, this seemed to have hit a sensitive spot for Divine Croc as he suddenly howled and shouted in fury: "I'm Number Two, not Number Three. Now get over here, kneel down, and beg to become my disciple. Then I'll pretend not wanting to, and then you beg some more, kowtowing over and over again, forcing me to acquiesce and accept you as a disciple even though I'm really actually happy inside. This is our South Seas Sect's rules, later on when you accept a disciple, you got to do the same thing, don't forget it."

"Can this rule be changed?" asked Duan Yu.

"Of course not!"

"If it is changed, then you are still a tortoise son of a turtle?"

"That's right!"

"This rule is really great, I agree. But you have to be sure not to change it, or else you would be a tortoise son of a turtle then."

"Good, now kneel down and beg me."

"No, I won't kneel down and kowtow to you, nor will I beg to become your disciple."

Divine Croc was so furious that his face turned burnt yellow. He snarled, revealing a mouthful of sharp teeth, as if he was about to pounce onto Duan Yu. "You are not going to kowtow and beg?" He shouted.

"No kowtowing, no begging."

"Then I'm going to snap your neck into two!" Divine Croc shouted as he took a step forward.

"Go ahead and snap. I can't fight back anyway!" Duan Yu replied as Divine Croc grabbed his shirt with his left hand and put his right hand on top of Duan Yu's head. "I can't fight back. What does that make you if you kill me?"

"A tortoise son of a turtle?"

"That's right."

"I can't kill him, and he isn't willing to beg me, what can I do?" Divine Croc was stumped. He looked around and suddenly noticed the Mu WanQing's concerned expression. An idea came to him as he scurried over to her and picked her body up by the back of her neck before taking a couple of steps back toward the cliff. Once he had arrived at the edge of the cliff, he took a step back with his left foot but kept his right toe on the edge in a move called "Rooster Stands on One Foot." It looked as if he was about to fall down the cliff along with Mu WanQing as he teetered there on the edge of the cliff.

Not realizing he was playing around with him and genuinely afraid for Mu WanQing's life, Duan Yu shouted: "Careful, stop that! You... let her go!"

"Boy, you are just like me. I have to have you as a disciple! I have to go over to that peak over there to wait for a couple of people..." smiling a sinister smile, Divine Croc paused for a moment to point to a faraway peak before continuing. "So I don't have time to waste here with you. So quickly come and beg to become my disciple, then I'll let your wife go. Otherwise, hehehe! Geh!"

He made a gesture with his hands as if he was snapping Mu WanQing's neck before suddenly turning around and jumping off the cliff. Pressing his right hand against the face of the cliff, he began to make his way down, carrying Mu WanQing with him.

"Hey, hey! Careful!" Duan Yu shouted and ran to the edge of the cliff as fast as he could. Looking down, he saw that

Divine Croc had already fallen almost fifty meters with Mu WanQing. As soon as Duan Yu sat back down from relief, his belly began hurting again.

Grabbed by the back of her shirt and dropping along with Divine Croc, Mu WanQing noticed that his hand was flat against the face of the cliff. Whenever the speed of their fall became too fast, their bodies would suddenly slow up a bit, as if he was using the power of his palm as a brake. Mu WanQing had no strength at all at this moment, but even if she did, there was no way she was going to struggle to free herself in midair. After a while, she decided to just close her eyes all together. After what seemed like forever, she felt her body suddenly bounce upward, signaling that they have landed. Not hesitating for even a moment, Divine Croc began to walk as soon as he landed. He was about average height, and with Mu WanQing being a rather tall woman, the two of them were about the same height if lined up next to one another. However, Divine Croc was carrying her like a baby, as if she weighed nothing at all. Walking swiftly through the rock filled, foggy valley, he made his way out in no time at all.

Upon reaching the end of the valley, he finally turned to Mu WanQing. "You are my disciple's wife, so I won't trouble you just yet. But if that boy doesn't become my disciple, hehe, then he won't be my disciple anymore, and you won't be my disciple's wife anymore. When the Divine Croc sees a pretty young girl, he has always first enjoyed her then killed her without exception," he said in a rather loud voice.

Mu WanQing involuntarily shuddered. "My husband doesn't know any martial arts, how is he supposed to get down from the cliff? If he was too worried about me and accidentally slips on his way down, where would you go find another disciple? Where will you go and find another talent like him?"

"A very good point. I didn't think about how he's supposed to get down," Divine Croc nodded in agreement

before suddenly letting out a drawn out howl.

Soon, two men wearing yellow appeared on the mountain side and bowed to Divine Croc. "Go to the top of that cliff over there and look after that boy there. If he says he wants to become my disciple, then carry him down. If he refuses, then just stay there by his side until he does, but don't hurt him. He's my hand picked successor, and definitely do not let anyone else take him in as a disciple!" Divine Croc instructed.

"Yes sir!"

After leaving his instructions, Divine Croc picked up Mu WanQing and began walking off again. Mu WanQing was slightly relieved, knowing she would be safe until whenever Duan Yu arrives. But her darling was stubborn as a bull and probably would rather die before becoming the disciple of someone as cruel and vicious as this Divine Croc.

"His feelings towards me seems to be very chivalrous but not loving. He probably wouldn't become this evil man's disciple just for me," Mu WanQing thought to herself. "Ay! I just wish that he's safe and sound and wouldn't fall off of the cliff. I wonder if his belly is still hurting."

Like her emotions and thoughts, Divine Croc was carrying her up and down as he made his way through the mountains. This man's stamina was truly astounding, as soon as he made it up a peak he would immediately walk back down without the slightest pause to rest. After making his way over four peaks in a row, he finally stopped atop of the highest peak around.

The first thing he did after he put Mu WanQing back down was pull his pants open and take a piss at the bottom of a tree. Mu WanQing, disgusted, immediately walked to a distance and pulled out her veil. Afraid that he might lose his control and throw all that master-disciple thing out of the window if he looked at her one too many times, she put on her veil, sat down on the side of a rather large rock, and tried to get some much needed rest.

After finishing his business and readjusting his pants, Divine Croc walked up to her.

"I see that you have put on your veil. That's probably for the best, or if I look at your face a bit more, something might happen," he commented.

"Well, at least you still can tell what is right and wrong," Mu WanQing mused.

"Why aren't you talking to me? And why are you pretending to be asleep? Think you are too good to talk to me?"

Mu WanQing shook her head and opened her eyes. "Mr. Yue, what's your given name? In the future when my husband becomes your disciple, I have to know your given name at least."

"My name is Yue... Yue.... Oh dammit! My dad picked my name for me and it's a terrible name! My dad did not do a single thing well in his life that bitch son of a tortoise!"

Mu WanQing almost cracked up at that remark: "If your father is a bitch son of a tortoise, what does that make you? Cursing at even your father, I guess you really don't have any manners at all." But then she was reminded that she didn't even know who her father was at all, even then her master told her that her father was a traitorous man. Realizing that she was not necessarily much better off than Divine Croc, she fell silent in sadness.

He paced in one direction for a bit, then turned around and paced back in the other direction, not letting Mu WanQing one moment of peace. Tired of watching him just walk back and forth, Mu WanQing closed her eyes. But she could still hear his footsteps pacing around endlessly.

"You just finished climbing several mountain peaks, aren't you tired?" She asked him. "Why don't you sit down and rest a bit?"

"Who asked you? Your daddy here just don't like sitting!"

Mu WanQing had no choice but to try and ignore him. Immediately her thoughts went to Duan Yu, leaving her

heart warm and sweet one moment but cold and bitter another.

Suddenly, the sounds of crying gently drifted through the air, the sound was unspeakably sad and wretched. Faintly, it sounded like a woman was crying: "My baby, my baby!"

Divine Croc spat in the general direction of the sound. "Pei! She's mourning again!" He commented before shouting. "What are you mourning for? I've been waiting here forever!"

"My baby! Your mother misses you so!" The voice seemed to continue on.

"Is that your mother?" Mu WanQing was greatly confused by this turn of events.

"Like hell she's my mom! What's wrong with you?" Divine Croc looked insulted at the mere question. "That bitch right there is 'No Evil Left Undone' Second Madame Yie. The word 'evil' is second in her nickname. One of these days, I'm going to exchange my nickname, 'Vicious Demon Evil Fiend', with hers!"

Mu WanQing suddenly had an epiphany: "So if the word 'evil' comes second in the nickname, it means that person is the second among the 'Arch-Villains'."

"What what is the number one's nickname? What is number four's?"

"Can you stop asking me question? Your daddy here doesn't want to talk to you anymore!" Divine Croc impatiently replied.

"Number One's nickname is 'Evil Overflowing the Cup', Number Four is called 'To the Core Evil'." A serene female voice suddenly answered.

{ I know the nicknames are a little bad, but I'm working on it, and it's hard to make the word evil appear in the right places. I'm open to suggestions. :o }

Mu WanQing was shocked by the speed of Second Madame Yie, the sound of her voice hadn't faded yet and she had already quietly made it up the mountain.

Immediately Mu WanQing turned to get a good look at her. She was wearing a light green dress. Her hair was long and dancing in the wind. She looked about forty and her face graceful and elegant. But both side of her face had three blood red scars that went from the bottom of her eyes all the way down to her chin as if somebody had just scratched her face open. In her arms was a two or three year old baby, a cute, chubby looking boy.

Mu WanQing had thought that this "No Evil Left Undone" Second Madame Yie would have been a terrifying woman because she was ranked ahead of Divine Croc. But she turned out to be quite good looking. In her surprise, Mu WanQing had to look her over again. Second Madam Yie shot her a sweet smile, but it caused Mu WanQing's entire body to shudder, for her smiled seemed to hide beneath it an infinite amount of suffering and sadness. Almost starting to cry right then and there, Mu WanQing immediately looked away.

"Third Sister, why isn't Number One and Number Four here yet?" asked Divine Croc.

"From the beat-up look on your face, it's obvious that you've just been taught a lesson by Number One, and yet you are thick skinned enough to ask why Number One isn't here yet?" Second Madame Yie quietly answered. "And besides, you are obviously third, yet you are so determined to get ahead of me. If you call me 'Third Sister' one more time, your older sister is going to have to get serious."

"Then get serious! What do I care?" Divine Croc angrily answered. "Do you want a fight?"

"If you want to fight, then I guess I'll keep you company then," Second Madame Yie answered with a slight smile.

"Mommy! Mommy! I want my mommy!" The kid in her arms suddenly began to ball.

"Good boy, I'm your mommy, stop crying." Second Madame Yie tried to console the boy.

But the boy just began to cry even louder: "I want my mommy! I want my mommy! You are not my mommy!"

Second Madam Yie began to rock him in her arms and started singing a little lullaby. "Rock rock rock, rock to grandma's bridge, grandma calls me angel...."

But the kid wouldn't stop crying. Divine Croc was getting really annoyed listening to this.

"Why are you trying to console the kid? If you going to kill him, then you might as well hurry up and kill him."

"... a bag of candy, a bag of fruit, eat a bag and keep a bag." Second Madame Yie kept on singing with a smile on her face.

Mu WanQing was shaking uncontrollably as the more she thought about what Divine Croc said the more frightened she became. According to Divine Croc, Second Madame Yie was going to kill the child, she was furious and afraid at the same time. Second Madame Yie endlessly tried to comfort the kid with another lullaby: "Good kid, mommy's good little boy, good little boys go to sleep soon." Her voice was filled with warmth and care that Mu WanQing could not bring herself to believe what Divine Croc just said.

"You kill a kid every day but yet you still put on this little act every time, have you no shame?" Divine Croc was furious.

"Don't be so loud, you are going to scare my little baby," Second Master Yie quietly told him.

Divine Croc suddenly reached out and tried to grab the kid, wanting to fling him to his death so he doesn't have to listen to another minute of his crying. But even though he was fast, Second Madame Yie was faster still. Her body stepped aside like a ghost or apparition and Divine Croc's move came up empty.

"Ai-yo! Third Brother, why are you trying to bully my baby for no reason?"

"I want to throw that little devil as far as I can so he will shut up!"

"My little darling baby, mommy loves you. Don't be afraid of your ugly monstrous third uncle, he can't beat your mommy." Second Madame Yie softly tried to comfort the kid. "You are so cute, mommy has to play around with you for the night before killing you. Your mommy can't bring herself to part with you yet."

Mu WanQing almost threw up after hearing that. "This Second Madame Yie should indeed be ranked ahead of Divine Croc. This Yue Number Three is stuck being 'Vicious Demon Evil Fiend,' he's not going to get past her for the rest of his life!" She thought.

After failing on his first attempt, it seemed as if Divine Croc knew that any other attempt would just be futile as he just paced back and forth, cursing fiercely at her under his breath. Suddenly, he shouted: "Get the hell out of here! Where is that kid? Why isn't he here to ask me to become his master?"

Two yellow shirt men slowly stepped out from behind a rock and stopped as far away from Divine Croc as they could. They were the two men that Divine Croc instructed to look after Duan Yu.

"Your... your humble servant climbed up that cliff, but... but he's not there. We can't... can't find him anywhere." One of them stuttered out.

Mu WanQing was shocked: "Did... did he fall off the cliff?"

"Were you guys too late in getting there and let that unlucky bastard fall to his death?" Divine Croc viciously demanded.

The two men did not dare to get any closer. "The two of us thoroughly... thoroughly rummaged through the base of the cliff and did not find a corpse anywhere." One of the men finally summoned up enough courage to reply.

"Then what are you suggesting? That he just flew away like a bird?" The Divine Croc became even more incensed. "How dare you lie to me like that!"

The two men immediately knelt down and began kowtowing with abandon, begging for mercy. All that could be heard was two whirls of wind as the Divine Croc hurled two large rocks at their direction, immediately killing them both.

Mu Wan Qing had already developed a healthy hatred for those men for their failure in finding Duan Yu. So when the Divine Croc killed them, she felt an instant of delight, but her joy was quickly pushed aside by clouds of questions in her mind. "If he's not at the top of the cliff, and there aren't any bodies at the bottom of the cliff, where could he be? Could it be that he had landed on some remote place on the face of the cliff where they couldn't find him, or maybe they did actually find his body but were too scared to say it?"

She had long since made up her mind that if Duan Yu had died, she could not go on living either. Besides, since she had fallen in to the Divine Croc's hands, there would surely be a great number of unimagineable tortures and terrors waiting for her if she did not die. But without Duan Yu's body, there was still the slightest glimmer of hope, and she found herself very reluctant to just die without knowing what had really happened like this.

The Divine Croc was livid with frustration, cursing left and right. "What the hell could those two bastards sons of a turtle Number One and Number Four be doing? How long before they finally show up? I'm getting damn impatient waiting here for them."

"What? Do you have enough guts not to wait for Number One?" Second Madame Yie asked.

"Number One wanted me to tell you that we should wait for him here on this peak for seven full days," The Divine Croc explained. "If he still hasn't shown up after seven days, then we should head to Zhong WanChou's house in Thousand-Calamities Valley and wait for him there, and we are not to leave there until we meet him."

"I said earlier that Number One must have given you a vicious beat down earlier, you can't deny that anymore now." Second Madame Yie matter of factly stated.

"When did I deny it?" The Divine Croc was still livid. "Sure, I can't beat Number One. Sure, he did beat me up. But it was not a VICIOUS beat down."

"Oh, so it wasn't a vicious beat down... my little darling, don't cry, mommy loves you... hmm, it must have been a very gentle beat down then... oh my little sweet darling baby...."

"It wasn't a very gentle beat down either." The Divine Croc guiltily admitted. "You better be careful too, if Number One wanted to beat you up, you can't get away either."

"I don't want to be some kind of First Madame Yie or anything like that, why would Number One trouble me? Darling sweetie pie...."

"Could you please stop calling him TaMaDe 'darling'? Could you?" The Divine Croc shouted, apparently getting very annoyed at Second Madame Yie.

"Third Brother, please calm down." Second Madame Yie smiled and replied. "Did you know that Number Four ran into some people on the way here, and he didn't come out of it all that well."

"What? Number Four ran into some problems?" The Divine Croc found the news very surprising. "Who?"

"This little girl here is looking at me all funny. She's cursing me on the inside for killing a child a day. Kill her first and I'll tell you."

"She's my disciple's wife, if I kill her, then my disciple would definitely not want me to be his master."

"Didn't your disciple fall off a cliff and die already?"

"Maybe not, if he fell to his death, then there should be at least a corpse. He's probably just hiding somewhere, soon he'll show up and beg me to take him in as a disciple."

"Alright, then let me do it, just tell your disciple to come after me." Second Madame Yie laughed and replied. "Those

eyes of hers are too pretty, enough to make me envious that I don't have eyes like that. So I'm going to dig her eyes out first."

A layer of cold sweat wetted Mu Wan Qing's back. But before she could react, she heard the Divine Croc's voice reply: "No way! Let me hit her sleep-pressure point and make her sleep for TaMaDe a day or two." Without waiting for a reply from Second Madame Yie, he reached out and poked Mu Wan Qing on the side of her waist and just below her armpit. Mu Wan Qing suddenly felt incredibly lightheaded and was out cold before she knew it.

After some period of time, Mu Wan Qing slowly came around. Her body was freezing cold. But sharp pangs of laughter were ringing in her ears, laughter that, even though they sounded like laughter, did not possess a shred of humor in them. Sometimes sharp, other times thick, the laughter was terrible to the ear. Knowing that the moment she moved she would be discovered with a very good chance of bringing disaster upon herself. So even though her limbs were numb from not moving, she dared not to move.

What she heard next was Divine Croc talking: "Number Four, you might as well stop tooting your own horn. Third Sister has already told me you had trouble, why do you keep denying it? So tell me, how many of them were there?"

"Seven guys ganged up on me, and everyone of them were top notch fighters. No matter how good I am I can't beat seven top notch fighters all at once can I?" A voice that was randomly switching between sharp and thick answered.

"So Number Four, 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' is here." Mu Wan Qing thought to herself. She really wanted to see what kind of person this 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' man was, but she was too scared to turn her head around and open her eyes.

"Number Four just loves to blow his own horn too much, there were only two men there, where did those five extra

men came from? Are there really that many top-notch fighters in this world?" Second Madame Yie replied.

"And how would you know about that? Did you see it with your own eyes?" Number Four angrily demanded.

"How would I know if I didn't see with my own eyes?" Second Madame Yie lightly chuckled. "Those two men, one of them used a fishing rod and the other one used a pair of ax, am I right? Hehe, those five men that you created out of thin air, what kind of weapons were they using?"

"If you were there, then why didn't you come and help me out? Were you hoping that I would die in their hands?" Number Four angrily shouted.

"You are 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' Yun Zhong He, is there a person who don't know that your lightness kungfu is one of the best? So you can't out-fight them, what? You can't out-run them?"

"So his name is Yun Zhong He," Mu Wan Qing noted.

Yun Zhong He was getting madder, and his voice rose in step with his temper. "If I die in other's hands, it doesn't add any fame or credit to you. Remember why us 'Four Arch-Villains' are gathering here for this time. To help that sag of resentment Zhong Wan Chou? I don't think so, he didn't even sent this wife to keep me company. Number One wants to get his revenge on the DaLi Emperor and summoned us to join our forces against them. I run into trouble, but you just sit there on the sidelines and watch with all that joy and delight, let's see what happens when I tell Number One about this."

Second Madame Yie let out a light laugh. "Fourth Brother, I have never in my life seen anyone whose lightness kungfu is better than yours, just like your name says, you are like a crane in the clouds, faint and light like the smoke but graceful like the swan. Forget those two guys, even me, your elder sister, can't hope to catch up. Why else would I not join in the fray?"

She seemed to be quite worried that Yun Zhong He would tell Number One, so immediately started praising him. Yun Zhong He let out a humph, but it seemed that his anger had at least subsided somewhat.

"So Number Four, who was it that troubled you? Could it be dogs from the Royal Palace?" Divine Croc asked.

"Nine out of ten they were." Yun Zhong He grumbled. "I don't think that there is anyone else inside the borders of DaLi who is of such caliber."

"The two of you kept on rambling about how you are going to easily charge into the DaLi Royal Palace, cut off that dog Emperor's head to take back as a trophy. I told you two that you are taking this whole matter too lightly, now do you believe me?" Second Madame Yie commented.

"Number One still hasn't shown up yet, it's now three days past the appointed date." Yun Zhong He suddenly said. "He's never like this, could... could"

"Could something have happened to him?" Second Madame Yie finished the sentence for him.

"Damn it! Number One told us to wait here for seven days, there's still four days left, what are you guys getting all worked up for?" Divine Croc was greatly annoyed by the talk. "Keep in mind what kind of person Number One is, he's nothing like you, running around with your tail between your legs whenever you run into anybody worth anything."

"What's wrong with escaping if you can't beat them? It's called knowing the situation." Second Madame Yie replied. "But I really am worried that he might have been ganged up on by a dozen or so masters, and you know he's the type that won't give up even if he's at the end of the rope."

"Damn it, bullshit!" Divine Croc was spraying more than talking at this point. "All this time that we have been with Number One, when has he ever been in trouble? How could he possibly run into trouble in this tiny DaLi country? Motherf... Man I'm starving again!" He reached down and picked up a cow leg that was lying on the ground and began

roasting it over the fire beside him. Not long after that, the delicious fragrance of leg permeated through the air.

"It seems like I have been unconscious here for three days from the way they are talking. I wonder if there's been any news about my darling?" Mu Wan Qing pondered. Having not eaten anything for four days, she was famished, and when her nose caught a whiff of the smell her belly began to grumble despite the best of her efforts.

Second Madame Yie smiled. "Little sister is getting hungry huh? You woke up a long time ago didn't you? Why are you still faking sleep? Don't you want to see what our 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' Number Four look like?"

Divine Croc knew that the moment Yun Zhong He catch a glimpse of Mu Wan Qing's beauty Yun Zhong He would lose all self control because unlike himself, who only rape and kill when he gets desperate, Yun Zhong He was a terrible sexual predator. So he immediately tore off a huge piece of the leg that was still not quite done and tossed it onto the ground just in front of Mu Wan Qing.

"Now get up and go somewhere farther away, I don't want you eavesdropping on our conversation." He commanded in a vicious voice.

Mu Wan Qing purposefully thickened her voice to a nearly unbearable cackle and asked: "Has my husband shown up?"

"TaMaDe!" Divine Croc answered agrily. "I went back and searched the entire cliff and valley myself, there wasn't even a trace of that little bastard. That little bastard is surely alive, somebody must have rescued him. I have waited for him here for three days now, I'm going to give him four more days. If he still doesn't show up by then, hehe, then I'm going to cook you and eat it."

That news lifted a huge weight off of Mu Wan Qing's heart. "The Divine Croc isn't just some pawn. If he thinks that darling isn't dead, then he must be alive. Ay! Is he even worried about me? Will he come here and save me?"

She picked up the piece of meat on the ground and slowly walked around to the other side of the huge boulder. Due to her hunger, she felt even more exhausted that she really was and could not make herself walk any faster. But luckily, because she had been peacefully lying on the ground for three days, her wounds have all healed.

"What's the big deal about that guy anyways that's making you treasure him so much?" She heard Second Madame Yie ask.

"That guy is so like me that it's scary, if he practices our Southern Seas Sect martial arts, then he would surely be a prodigy and maybe even be better than me." The Divine Croc happily explained. "Hehe, even though between the four of us Arch-Villains, I'm relegated to... to second place, when it comes to our disciples, then mine will surely be Number One, it won't even be close."

Slowly and steadily, Mu Wan Qing walked farther and farther. Hearing Divine Croc boast about how Duan Yu's potential was so rare made her feel both happy and worried at the same time, not to mention quite tickled at the notion. "Darling is a book worm, what kind of kungfu would he learn? Other than being quite courageous, there's nothing that he's good at. If Divine Croc really gets his precious disciple, then Southern Seas Sect would be in deep trouble."

She found a rather out of the way place under the shadows of another big boulder, sat down, and began slowly tearing off the meat to eat. Although she was starving, this slab of beef weighed almost two kilograms, and she was full before she could even finish half a kilogram. So she stopped and began to ponder some more. "Once the seven days are up, if my darling really does turn out to be a heartless man and doesn't come to save me, then there's no way I can come out of this alive." Her heart went sour at the thought. "Even if I do somehow survive, how could I possibly go on living after this?"

She spent the next few days like this. The sayings told of how days felt like years, she finally understood what those sayings meant during that time. Day and night, she hoped that there would be some sound, some little sign from the foot of the mountain, even if it did not come from Duan Yu, it would have been better than the torture of slow moving but ever bearing sun and the endless nights. With every passing hour, her heart felt heavier and heavier with sadness. All she could think about was "If you really wanted to come and save me, then even though making your way up and down the mountains aren't easy, you could definitely get here in two or three days. So if you don't come today, then there's no reason to think that you would come the next day. I know you don't want to take Divine Croc as master, but do you really not have any feelings towards me? Then why did you take me in your arms and kiss me? Why did you promise to take me as your wife?"

It got worse and worse the more she waited. "All men are heartless." The words that her master told her kept ringing in her ear. Even though she kept telling herself that "Darling isn't like that", she knew that she was merely lying to herself. Fortunately for her, Divine Croc, Second Madame Yie, and Yun Zhong He did not bother her at all these few days.

The three of them were waiting for Number One among them, proclaimed as the vilest man in the world. Although they were not as anxious as her, they were still worried and walking about endlessly like ants on a hot stove. Despite of the distance between herself and the three of them, Mu Wan Qing could still hear the sound of them bickering at each other now and then.

On the night of the sixth day, Mu Wan Qing thought to herself: "Tomorrow is that last day, there's no way that heartless idiot is going to show up then. So it's probably best that I try and escape under the cover of darkness tonight. If I wait until tomorrow, then my chances would greatly diminish." So she stood up and began stretching a bit to

warm up. In these six days, despite of her anxious outlook, the wounds and injuries on her body had pretty much healed up.

"The best thing to do is probably wait for the three of them to start fighting again, then quietly run off a couple hundred meters or so and find a cave or something to hide in. There's no way the three of them would suspect that I would still be hiding on this mountain, they would undoubtedly think that I have ran off to some far place, maybe they would even 'chase' me all the way for a ten kilometers or so. And once they leave, I'd be able to make my escape." But then her thoughts turned. "Ay, what am I thinking? They don't have any enmities or grudges towards me, why would they come chasing after me? If I run away, fine. If I don't, fine. It doesn't make a difference to them. Why would they care?"

Several times she almost worked herself up enough to get up and leave, but everytime she was held back by the thoughts of Duan Yu. "What if he comes for me tomorrow? If I don't see him tomorrow, then surely we will never meet again in this life. What if he really does come to be together with me through thick and thin, but then it turns out that I had left and that he was killed because he refused to be Divine Croc's disciple, what if that happens?"

Stuck between a rock and a hard place and not knowing what to do, she teetered back and forth between leaving and staying until the east began to turn bright. Yet she still could not make up her mind.

Chapter 5: Subtle Steps and Hanging Threads

Fan translation by Moinllieon ([send email](#)), Pacifian and ani411 [Second Edition]
wuxiapedia.com / www.spcnet.tv

Translated by Moinllieon

The day break solved her problem for her, because she could not escape any more.

"If that heartless jerk comes, he comes; if he doesn't, he doesn't. All I can do is wait here for death to come." Her thoughts were just turning towards the morose when she suddenly heard a sharp crack behind her. Turning around, she saw an object fell out of the sky and land in the relatively dense area of grass about one hundred meters away.

"What could that be?" She immediately flattened herself against the ground. Only when no other sound could be heard from the bush did she, as silently as she could, crawl over to take a peek.

When she finally made it to the thicket and pushed the tall grass aside, what she saw made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Laid side to side within the thicket of grass was the bodies of six infants, some on their side, others facing up. Among them was the infant that she saw Second Madame Yie holding in her hands days ago.

"There are six bodies, and she's been here for six days. So it true, that evil wench does kill an infant every day. But why?" It was hard to tell how Second Madame Yie killed the babies because there were no blood or obvious injuries on the bodies. One of the babies was wearing bright and colorful cloths, but the other five were wearing cloths made of rough materials typical of farmers, presumably farmers of the No Measure Mountains. Ever since she had left her hide

out with her master, Mu Wan Qing had killed quite a number of people. But all of her victims had been people of the pugilistic world who did not have good intentions towards her. Witnessing first hand the murders of these innocent infants made her entire body tremble in fear.

Suddenly a shadow flashed across her view. A person was shooting down the mountain side like a bird, landing every so often, but only momentarily, before taking off again. It was none other than Second Madame Yie. Watching the speed with which she flew, Mu Wan Qing realized that it was a speed that even her master could never hope to obtain. With that realization, a sense of hopelessness shot through her. Her legs gave out from underneath her, making her sit down onto the ground.

She sat there dumbstruck for a while before coming around again. She lined the bodies of the six infants up and covered them with little rocks and dirt. Suddenly, a freezing sensation ambushed her from behind. She immediately tapped the ground with her left foot and shot forward. A laughter and inexplicably switches from sharp and thick could be heard coming from behind her.

"Little lady, your hubby just ditched ya, so why don't you follow me instead?" It was Yun Zhong He.

He arrived at the same time as his voice, reaching out trying to grab Mu Wan Qing's waist. Just as it looked like his claws were going to catch her when a sideways palm came in and parried away his hand. The palm was from none other than the Divine Croc.

"Number Four, you better keep away from my Southern Sea Sect!" He yelled in anger.

"Your disciple isn't showing up, so this little missy isn't related to your sect." Yun Zhong He quickly hopped about twenty or so meters out of the way. Only now did Mu Wan Qing get a good look at him. He was extremely tall, but also extremely thin, reminding her of a long bamboo stick. Even his face looked impossibly long.

"How the hell do you know my disciple won't show up? Did you kill him?" The Divine Croc replied in anger. "That's right! You must have saw how great my disciple is and kidnapped him for yourself! You messed my plans you bastard, I'm going to strangle you dry!"

Being the unreasonable brute that he was, he did not even wait for Yun Zhong He to answer his charges before throwing himself at Yun Zhong He.

"I don't know what shape or color your disciple is as I have never seen him before, how could I try and take him in?" Yun Zhong He yelled as he swiftly dodged Divine Croc's initial flurry.

"Bullshit!" Divine Croc angrily shouted. "Who's going to believe that shit? You lost your fight and took it out on my disciple!"

"Is your disciple a man or a woman?"

"A man, of course! What would I do with a female disciple?"

"Well then! Yun Zhong He only goes after women and is never interested in men. You know all about that don't you?"

Divine Croc was in mid-air when he heard this remark. Finding some reason in it, he immediately switched to "Thousand Ton Boulder" and dove back to Earth.

"So where did my disciple go?" He inquired, placing his right foot up on a piece of rock that happened to be by his feet. "Why hasn't he shown up yet?"

"Hehe, that's your Southern Seas Sect's own business, what does it have to do with me?" Yun Zhong He joked.

"How dare you make fun of me!" The Divine Croc was already terribly frustrated by the absense of Duan Yu, so his temper was very touchy at the moment.

"If I could get the two of them in a fight, it would be very advantageous for me." Mu Wan Qing decided.

"That's right, this Yun Zhong He must have harmed your disciple!" So she shouted. "Or else how could he get down from the cliff all by himself? This Yun Zhong He's lightness

kungfu is amazing, so he must have went up the cliff, took your disciple somewhere, and killed him to make sure that Southern Seas Sect would not produce a powerful figure. Why else would the body be missing?"

The Divine Croc slapped his own forehead as if he had just had an epiphany.

"You see? Even my disciple's wife says so. Are you still saying you are innocent?"

"My husband told me that he could only dream to be so lucky as to have a master as great as you and he has to drive himself so as to bring fame and glory to the great Southern Seas Sect as well as the Divine Croc of the Southern Seas. So famous so that all those 'No Evil Left Undone' and 'Evil Overflowing the Cup' would be so envious of you. But who could have guessed that this Yun Zhong He would be so cruel as to kill your disciple. You'll never be able to find a disciple so like you again!" For every point she made, the Divine Croc slapped his forehead. She continued. "My husband's back of the head is shaped just like yours, not to mention that he is a physical specimen just like you. He's the perfect successor to the Southern Seas Sect. But yet this Yun Zhong He just want to trouble you. So why haven't you avenged your disciple?"

By this time, Divine Croc's eyes were literally on fire as he threw himself at Yun Zhong He. Yun Zhong He knew that Mu Wan Qing was intentionally trying to instigate something but did not have a chance to defend himself. Knowing that his kungfu was not up to par with Divine Croc, he immediately turned and ran when he saw Divine Croc coming at him. Divine Croc landed and took off, once again flying towards him.

"He's running because he's guilty!" Mu Wan Qing poured gasoline on the fire. "If he didn't kill your disciple, then he wouldn't be running!"

"That's right, that makes sense!" Divine Croc shouted. "Give me back my disciple!"

One ran, the other chased. In a blink of an eye the two of them disappeared over the top of the mountain.

Mu Wan Qing was just padding herself on her back when she realized that the Divine Croc's shouts were getting closer once again as the two men worked their way back around to this side of the mountain again.

It was obvious that Yun Zhong He was much faster than Divine Croc. With his long and lanky body, he looked like a bamboo in the wind, shaking left and right, yet a good distance was always maintained between him and Divine Croc. The two of them flashed by in front of Mu Wan Qing and instantly disappeared around to the other side of the mountain again. By the second time the two men made their way back around, Yun Zhong He suddenly changed directions and floated to just Mu Wan Qing's side. He reached out and tried to grab her shoulder. Caught off guard, Mu Wan Qing immediately flicked up her right arm and sent a poisonous arrow flying towards his face. Yun Zhong He slid to his left a little and dodged the arrow. Somehow, with the way his body was twisted, his long arms arrived in front of Mu Wan Qing's face. Mu Wan Qing tried to get out of the way, but she was still a step too slow. A gust of coolness hit her face as her veil ended up in Yun Zhong He's hand.

Yun Zhong He was momentarily dumb struck by Mu Wan Qing's beauty, and then an evil smile crept onto his face.

"Woah, hot damn! This little girlie here is quite something here. Could be a bit more coy, or else she would be perfect...." While he was busy talking, Divine Croc arrive with his palm howled as his aimed for Yun Zhong He's back. Yun Zhong He gathered his power into his right palm and countered.

"Hong!" A huge explosion of sound could be heard as the power of their strikes met. Mu Wan Qing suddenly felt as if all the air was squeezed out of her as she found it impossible to breath due to the air pressure. Within a radius of several

meters, the dust and dirt on the ground swirled about in a frenzy. Using the power of Divine Croc's strike, Yun Zhong He shot back and was instantly five meters away.

"Eat my palm!" Divine Croc screamed.

"You can't catch me, and I can't beat you." Yun Zhong He laughingly observed. "We can keep this up for another day and would still be like this."

Once again, the two disappeared, still in chase. But the dirt and dust around Mu Wan Qing have yet to settle.

"I have to figure out a way to get in Yun Zhong He's way, or else these two would never fight." She decided.

Translated by Pacifian

And so she waited for both men to chase around the mountain for the very third time; and as they approached, she leapt upwards. *Chi* sounds reverberated continuously in the air. The next instant, approximately six to seven poisonous arrows raced towards Yun Zhong He.

"Return my husband's life!"

Hearing the swishing sounds of arrows slicing through the air, Yun Zhonghe understood the severity of the situation he was in. Soaring skyward and diving downward, he simultaneously evaded the flurry of arrows which were directed at him. The next moment, Mu Wan Qing unsheathed her sword and slashed twice at his direction, viciously. How would Yun Zhong He not understand her intentions behind all these? Not in the least concerned with defending himself, Yun Zhong He simply floated away; behind him, all Mu Wan Qing's strikes landed on air.

However, with her interference, the Divine Croc's palms finally managed to reach Yun Zhong He. The palm winds generated from his forceful palm strikes completely enveloped Yun Zhong He's body.

"Number Three," Yun Zhong He said, baring a ferocious grin. "I have given way to you countless times; if not for the sake of preserving the friendship between us — the four

Arched Villains, do you for once really believe I'm afraid of you?"

That said, his hands reached for his waist, each grasping a steel handle. This handle was at least three feet in length, and at the tip of it lay a human hand. The fingers on the steel handle extended in all directions, and the fingertips glowed in a scintillatingly blue colour. The left claw headed for the right, whilst the right claw went for the left. Instantly, Yun Zhong He's body was sealed in a tight defensive position.

The Divine Croc said gleefully, "Excellent! We haven't met each other for seven years, and now you have trained yourself with such an unorthodox weapon! Now, watch mine!" Done with speaking, he released the contents of his backpack, and from it he pulled out two weapons.

Mu Wan Qing retreated hastily: she knew it was useless for her to join in the battle.

The Divine Croc held a strange-looking scissors with a short handle and a long blade in his right hand, the blade was full of serrated blades, resembling the ferocious jaws of a crocodile. On the other hand, he wielded a soft whip that has razor spikes all over; it looked almost indistinguishable from the tail of a crocodile.

Yun Zhong He glanced at the bizarre weaponry the Divine Croc was using. Without warning, his right steel claw flew out, charging towards the Divine Croc's face. The Divine Croc flipped the Croc Tail Whip in his right hand, and a noisy *pa* resounded, causing the steel claw to propel away forcefully. However, Yun Zhong He's reflexes were amazingly quick; deftly, he flung the other steel claw even before he withdrew his right hand.

Crack! The Croc Jaws Scissors extended itself, clipped Yun Zhong He's left steel claw and gave it a brutal twist. Even though Yun Zhonghe's steel claw was made of pure steel, the Croc Jaws Scissors seemed to be casted from some

unknown material. It broke two fingers out of the five on the Steel Claw with absurd ease. Fortunately, Yun Zhong He had retracted his hand swiftly, preventing the other three fingers from being snipped away. However, the Claw skill he was practising all along required the use of all ten fingers. Now that he had two fingers missing, the power displayed in his moves was greatly weakened. A crestfallen look fell over Yun Zhong He's face.

The Divine Croc laughed nastily as he advanced, snatching the offensive position with a nimbly-curling Croc-Tail whip.

All of a sudden, a green shadow intervened; this new apparition slipped ethereally and elegantly between the two fighters.

This person was none other than Second Madam Ye.

Her left palm swept across horizontally, pressing itself onto the Croc Tail Whip, and manoeuvred it aside. Yun Zhong He quickly seized this opportunity to leap away from danger.

"Number Three, Number Four, why are the both of you fighting with each other?" Second Madam Ye asked. Turning around, she saw Mu Wan Qing's face; suddenly, her expression changed dramatically.

Mu Wan Qing saw that Second Madam Ye was holding an infant in her arms. It was a boy, approximately around the age of three to four, he was dressed in clothes made of brocade, and looked really adorable. She immediately understood the purpose of Second Madam Ye descent of the mountain: she wanted to search for her child. The peculiar look in her eyes scared Mu Wan Qing; she looked away immediately, not daring to face Second Madam Ye.

Suddenly, the infant cried, "Daddy! Daddy! Shan Shan wants Daddy!"

"Shan Shan be obedient. Daddy will come soon." said Second Madam Ye soothingly.

The scene of the six grisly remains she saw on the grass plains earlier swam into view; after hearing Second Madam

Ye's affectionate words of comfort to the infant, Mu Wan Qing felt her hair rise on end.

"Second sister, Number Three's recent Croc Jaws Scissors and Croc Tail Whip kung fu is quite amazing," laughed Yun Zhong He; "I have only played with him for a short while, yet I still found it difficult to even defend myself. What skills have you been practising these seven years? Are you able to challenge Number Three's dual formidable weapons? I am afraid you, too, are unable to do so."

He made no mention on Divine Croc wronging him, nor did he say anything about how the Divine Croc had blatantly claimed about his non-existent murder of Duan Yu — even when he had absolutely no idea how Duan Yu looked like. All he wanted to do was to get both Second Madam Ye and Divine Croc in battle with each other by casually saying a few simple sentences.

As Second Madam Ye ascended the mountain, she had already seen the two men battling with their lives — she knew their spar wasn't all that friendly. A faint smile lifted the sides of her lips as she replied, "For seven years I have been practising my internal energy kung fu industriously — my physical combat skills have thus become somewhat rusty. Naturally, I am not a match for either of you."

From the waist of the mountain below, a cry rang. "That madam up there, what are you trying to do with my child? Return him to me!"

Before the voice ceased, a man has already leaped towards the peak, his body movements fluid and agile. He was in his forties, and wore bronze-coloured clothes of satin, his hand wielding a long sword.

The Divine Croc hollered, "Who are you, punk? How dare you make so much noise here! Were you the one who stole my disciple?"

"This mister is the renowned master of the East Faction "No Measure Sword", Zuo Zi Mu. His swordplay is not worth a

single comment, but his baby sure is an adorable one,” explained a laughing Second Madam Ye.

Realization dawned on Mu Wan Qing. *Second Madam Ye was unable to search for a kid in Mt. No Measure; as a result, she decided to do with the child of the master of No Measure Sword sect.*

“Mister Zuo, your darling son is so lovable and interesting. Once I’m done hugging him, I will return him to you tomorrow. Fret not.”

Second Madam Ye then kissed Shan Shan’s cheek and ruffled his hair gently, her eyes filled with motherly warmth. Shan Shan saw his father and began to cry, “Daddy! Daddy!”

Zuo Zi Mu extended his left hand and walked closer towards his child, as he implored, “My child is extremely playful; there is nothing fun about him, so please return him immediately, and I will be eternally grateful to you.”

The moment he saw his son, his tone changed abruptly from rough to soft. He feared that this woman might suddenly exert force and strangle his son to death.

The Divine Croc chuckled, “This madam is “No Evil Left Undone”, Third Madam Ye. Even if the Emperor’s son landed in her arms, chances of her returning the baby are zero.”

Cold sweat poured down Zuo’s back, as he began to tremble. “You... You are Third Madam Ye? So Second Madam Ye ... Second Madam Ye is related to you in... in what way?”

He has heard of the dreaded name of the “Four Arched Villains”, and remembered the person ranked second among the Four Villains was a lady called Second Madam Ye, who loved snatching an infant by day to play and tease until evening, which she would then brutally torture the poor kid to death. The last thing he wanted was that this “Third Madam Ye” was somehow related to Second Madam Ye, say, as sisters, and that both of them somehow shared the same insane habit.

Second Madam Ye gave a coquettish laughter and said, "Don't listen to his nonsense. I am Second Madam Ye. Since when have there been a Third Madam Ye?"

All colour drained out of Zuo Zi Mu's face. When he realized his child has been snatched away, he tried all his might to chase the abductor; however, he realized her kung fu was way above his. Initially, he thought since he had not been acquainted with this lady who snatched his child, she wouldn't harm Shan Shan since they haven't had any past grudges or feuds. It was only until this point that he knew this lady was in fact Second Madam Ye — he felt all the words he had initially wanted to say glued themselves to his throat, be they pleading or demanding.

Second Madam Ye held Shan Shan's palm and examined it closely under the sun. Following that, she checked the colour of his blood and clucked her tongue in praise — as though he was an animal in the market, awaiting to be fed and eventually slaughtered for food. "What a healthy young boy he is! Look at his glowing smooth skin, and his blood — scarlet and crystal clear, almost transparent! After all, he is the child of a wulin pugilist; therefore he is undoubtedly much more special compared with those children raised in a farm."

Watching the hungry, ravenous look in her eyes, which looked as though she was about to eat Shan Shan alive in no time, Zuo Zi Mu wasn't willing to give up without a fight, even though he knew he was no match for her. Overwhelmed with fury, he unleashed the stance "White Rainbow pierces the Sun".

His sword lunged at Second Madam Ye's throat.

A faint laughter emitted from Second Madam Ye; she gently held the infant at the path of the sword. Had Zuo Zi Mu continued this strike, his child would undoubtedly be killed.

Fortunately, he was quite experienced in the fields of swordplay. While this stance was at its peak of motion, he

swiftly retracted the force behind the sword, and the tip of the blade wavered briefly in the air, before a second flash of light blinked. This time round, the sword went for Second Madam's right shoulder.

Instead of evading this strike, Second Madam Ye shifted Shan Shan's body once again, and held him in front of her. In the swift blink of an eye, Zuo Zi Mu stabbed four times, yet all Second Madam Ye did was to lazily change the position of Shan Shan's body. All four vicious stances he pulled on her could only be used halfway and had to be forcibly stopped by the user himself. After all these stances have completed, Shan Shan began to bawl in fright.

After being chased round the mountain thrice — all thanks to Divine Croc — plus having to tolerate the heart-wrenching pain of watching two precious fingers of his Steel Claw snapped off, Yun Zhong He felt himself boiling with anger. With the unbearable fury threatening to erupt from within him, he soared into the air, thrusting out his Left Steel Claw towards Zuo Zi Mu's head.

Lifting his sword, Zuo Zi Mu performed the stroke "Ten Thousand Plants Vie for Glamour" in an effort to parry Yun Zhong He's move. In an instant, madly-dancing sword sparks enshrouded the top of his head, shielding his upper body against Yun Zhong He's attacks.

A *dang* sound echoed in the air: both weapons clashed with each other.

Following that, Zuo Zi Mu unleashed the stance "Pushes Boat towards the Water Current", sending the blade of his sword towards Yun Zhong He's throat. All of a sudden, the fingers of a Steel Claw closed onto the blade, trapping the sword.

Zuo Zi Mu would never anticipate this even in his wildest dreams, but he was unwilling to release his sword just like this. He immediately channeled his internal energy, trying fruitlessly to release the sword from his opponent's grip.

With a *pu*, Yun Zhong He's right Steel Claw sank into Zuo Zi Mu's shoulder. Fortunately, with two fingers on the Steel Claw snapped off, the damage inflicted on Zuo Zi Mu wasn't too bad. However, it was enough to cause some severe bleeding. Now that he had three steel fingers firmly closed on to his opponent's shoulder bone, Yun Zhong He took this opportunity to leap forward and kicked him forcefully.

These movements were like a leap of a rabbit or the swooping down of a crane: not only were they incredibly nifty, they were also totally unpredictable — impossible to block. Even the leader of a powerful sect like Zuo Zi Mu had absolutely no chance of defending himself.

"Number Four," the Divine Croc praised, "these few strokes aren't too bad, at least they aren't too embarrassing."

Second Madam Ye giggled again, "Leader Zuo, have you seen our Number One before?"

Zuo Zi Mu's right shoulder bone remained clutched onto painfully by Yun Zhong He's Steel Claw; he wasn't able to move an inch. He tried hard to bear the pain and answered with gritted teeth, "Who is your Number One? I have never seen him before."

The Divine Croc joined in the interrogation. "Have you seen my disciple before?"

"Who is your disciple? I have never seen him before."

The Divine Croc roared furiously. "Since you do not know who my disciple is, how could you say you have never seen him before? Fart your mother's ***** ***** ***! Third sister, quick! Let's devour his son alive!"

Second Madam Ye laughed, "Your second sister doesn't eat little infants. Leader Zuo, please leave, we don't want to take your life."

"Since you don't want to take my life, second ... Second Madam Ye, please return my child to me, I will go search for three to four kids for you to play with. I shall be eternally grateful to you."

“That’s fine with me, go search for eight little kids and I shall return your son to you. We have four people here in total, each of us shall carry two children each, and that should be enough to satisfy my needs for eight days. Number Four, release him.”

Yun Zhong He smirked as he released the trigger. Teeth still gritted, Zuo Zi Mu stood up, and bowed deeply towards Second Madam Ye; he then extended his arms to hug his child.

Second Madam Ye laughed. “Being a man from the pugilistic fraternity, how could you not know the basic rules? Until you finally get eight kids prepared for an exchange, do you think I will casually return the child to you?”

Seeing Shan Shan in her hands, Zuo Zi Mu felt displeased, but as a victim of circumstances, he could only nod and said gloomily, “I will pick eight fattest children for you to play with, please treat my child with good care.”

Second Madam Ye ignored him. She cradled the child, humming a tune, before saying, “Little grandson, your nanny adores you so much.”

Zuo Zi Mu understood the meaning behind calling Shan Shan “grandson”: Second Madam Ye was implying she was now his mother. Unable to laugh nor cry, he turned to his son and said, “Shan Shan be obedient. Daddy will come and hug you as soon as I can.”

Seeing his father leave, Shan Shan bawled noisily, struggling to jump into his father’s arms. Zuo Zi Mu couldn’t bear to leave his child; he cast a sideways glance at Shan Shan a few more times, before holding on to his injured shoulder and turned around, slowly descending the mountain.

Suddenly, a sharp whistling sound shook the air; it seemed to be coming from behind the mountain. The whistling kept sounding continually; it seemed like it will never fade.

Both the Divine Croc and Yun Zhong He had glee written all over their faces.

“Number One is finally here!”

Both leapt towards the direction of the whistling sound, vanishing from sight almost instantly like gases diffusing into the air. However, Second Madam Ye seemed oblivious of the sound; instead she continued playing with Shan Shan, until her gaze fell on Mu Wan Qing.

She simpered, “Miss Mu, you have such gorgeous eyes on your mesmerizing face, this is absolutely intolerable. Leader Zuo, help do me a favour and dig out this lady’s eyeballs.”

Now that his son was being held captive, Zuo Zi Mu had no choice but to obey. “Miss Mu, it’s best that you follow according to Second Madam Ye’s instructions, it will save you much pain and suffering,” said Zuo, as he brandished his sword at her direction, before stabbing the sword towards her.

“Despicable lowlife!” Mu Wan Qing shrieked. She pulled out her sword and swung it at Zuo’s left shoulder. Three strokes were exchanged; suddenly, Mu Wan Qing’s body swerved as she threw out her left arm.

Chi! Chi! Chi!

Three poisonous arrows flew towards Second Madam Ye, attempting to attack her off-guard.

“Don’t hurt my child!” Zuo Zi Mu yelled.

What Mu Wan Qing did not expect was that as speedy her poison arrows might be, all it took of Second Madam Ye was a mere whisk of her left sleeve and all three arrows were wrapped, instantly, into a harmless bundle; she then disposed them off easily by throwing the arrows aside. When that was done, she conveniently removed Shan Shan’s shoe and flung it towards Mu Wan Qing’s back.

Mu Wan Qing heard something soaring towards her from behind. She hastily swung her sword to the back, trying to knock it away. Unfortunately, her injury caused her to hold the sword at a wrong angle, such that the shoe was able to

slide down the surface of her sword upon contact and struck her right waist with a loud *pu* sound.

As Second Madam Ye tossed the shoe, she imbued her internal energy into the shoe, Mu Wan Qing tried desperately to use her own internal energy to resist that of Second Madam Ye. However, in the process of all this she was unable to take even a single breath and thus became momentarily paralyzed. No longer being able to hold onto her sword, she released her grip on the weapon as it fell with a loud “qiang-lang”. The very next thing she knew, a second shoe was soaring towards her, striking her chest.

Mu Wan Qing’s eyes saw nothing but darkness; she was unable to hold on any longer and collapsed. Zuo Zi Mu’s sword swerved abruptly and aimed towards her chest; meanwhile, he extended his left hand to gouge out her right eye.

“Brother Duan!” cried Mu Wan Qing as she jumped towards the blade; she'd rather die under the sword than undergo the excruciating torture — and humiliation — of getting her eyes gorged out.

Zuo Zi Mu pulled back his sword to prevent killing her; suddenly he felt something mighty tugging at his wrists. In an instant, he lost control of the sword; it flew towards the skies upon release. The powerful force he'd just experienced forced him back several steps.

All three of them gasped as they watched the sword flying in mid-air. A soft, thin rope wrapped around the blade of the sword, an iron metal handle was attached to the other end of the rope; it was held onto by a soldier in yellow garments. This man appeared to be around in his thirties; the heroism expressed in his facial features was impressive yet frightening. A cold sneer spread across his face.

Second Madam Ye recognized this man as the very person who battled with Yun Zhong He seven days ago, and knew that his martial arts are not weak; in fact, his martial arts were only a notch weaker than hers. She was not afraid

of him; however, she feared that his companions have arrived too.

And indeed, another yellow-clothed soldier stood at the East, an axe tied to his waist.

Before she could say another word, noises rumbled loudly from behind her. She turned around and saw two more yellow-clothed soldiers standing at the South-East and the South-West direction. Like the two soldiers who first arrived, they had uncarved gems on their collar and looked like military officers. The soldier at the North-East wielded a pair of judge pens, while the other at the North-West held a staff forged using refined copper, which was so tall it reached his eyebrows.

All four men stood around the corners of the peak, forming an enclosed wall around the three.

Zuo Zi Mu called out loudly, "So the four honorable Dali palace guardians Chu, Gu, Fu, Zhu have arrived. Zuo Zi Mu from No Measure Sword pays his respect here." After speaking, he bowed courteously to them.

Palace guardian Zhu Dan Chen, the man wielding the pair of judge pens clasped his fist respectfully in the direction of Zuo Zi Mu. The other three military officers, however, ignored him.

Chu Wan Li, the palace guardian who arrived first among the four, brandished the metal handle in his hand, causing the sword trapped in mid-air by his rope to vibrate vigorously. The reflection caused by the sun rays made the sword sparkle beautifully like stars in the night, as he sneered, "No Measure Sword is quite a powerful sect in Dali, but nobody expected the leader of the sect to be such a despicable creature. Where is Young Master Duan?"

Initially, all that Mu Wan Qing could think of was suicide and more suicide. Now that a potential saviour has arrived, these thoughts were replaced immediately by relief and joy. Hearing this palace guardian enquiring about Duan Yu, she suddenly felt as if this stranger were a close relative of hers.

Zuo Zi Mu murmured, "Young... Young Master Duan? Ah yes, I saw him a few days ago, but I have no clue to where he is now."

"Young Master Duan has been tortured to death by this evil lady's brother," Mu Wan Qing pointed an accusing finger at Second Madam Ye, before adding, "That man was named something like 'To The Core Evil' Yun Zhong He; he looks so skinny and tall I could compare him to a bamboo."

"What? That man killed Young Master?" Chu Wan Li gasped.

Grief and fury overwhelmed Fu Si Gui, the palace guardian wielding the copper staff. "Young Master Duan," he bellowed, the copper staff in his hands lunging towards the top of Second Madam Ye's head. It looked almost ready to slam down onto her head. "I will avenge your death!"

With a flash Second Madam Ye evaded Fu Si Gui's moves as her body streaked about, while she shrieked, "Aiyo! My little babies, you, Dali's four palace guardians surnamed Chu, Gu, Fu and Zhu. How could you kiddies die so young? How can mommy not feel miserable? You little unfortunate babies, wait for mommy while in hell!"

Chu, Gu, Fu and Zhu palace guardians were only slightly younger than her, yet Second Madam Ye kept calling out "my little children" and "unfortunate babies", claiming to be their mother.

Fu Si Gui looked murderous; he swung his copper staff viciously about, creating fierce swishing noises in the air. In an instant, his copper staff dissolved into a yellow mist which enclosed Second Madam Ye in between.

Holding onto Zuo Zi Mu's son, Second Madam Ye's weaving body penetrated every opening in the flurry of her opponent's stances, evading every single stroke of the copper staff. As she dodged about, the child in her arms started crying.

Zuo Zi Mu anxiously cried for everybody to stop fighting, now that he feared that his child might get hurt. "Both of

you stop fighting! Both of you stop fighting!”

Another palace guardian withdrew his axe and bellowed, “‘No Evil left Undone’ Second Madam Ye certainly lives up to her name. Allow me Gu Du Cheng to challenge your amazing skills.”

As soon as his voice can be heard, Gu Du Cheng went rolling on the floor. His hand shot out suddenly, as he hacked at her legs with the strongest move of his “Viciously Intersecting Eighteen Axes”. Axes seemed to appear from both sides of her body; they closed in towards her and began striking brutally from all directions.

Second Madam Ye laughed, “This child is such an obstruction. You kill him first.”

With that, she shifted Shan Shan towards the blade of the axe. Gu Du Cheng gasped and withdrew his axe immediately. Without missing a beat, Second Madam Ye seized this chance to launch a flying kick at his shoulder. Fortunately, this kick only caused him to stagger without suffering from any injury, for Gu Du Cheng had quite a muscular build. Recovering from the pain, he immediately jumped up and attack.

However, Second Madam Ye had the child as a form of shield; as such, Gu Du Cheng and Fu Si Gui’s attacks met with restrictions everywhere: neither of them had the intention of harming the little infant.

Zuo Zi Mu shouted again, “Careful, my child is in her hands! Careful! Careful! Brother Fu, your staff is a little bit too high. Brother Gu, your axe mustn’t... mustn’t get too close to my child.”

Amidst all the mess, the melodious sound of a flute resounded in the air from the mountain ridge. It sounded clear, loud and intense. Shortly after, the music seemed to be coming from nearby. From behind the mountain, a middle-aged man sauntered into view, wearing large robes and sleeves. He had three tufts of beard and had a lofty

appearance. He walked gracefully towards them, playing the metal flute in his hands as he did so.

Zhu Dan Chen darted towards his side and whispered something into his ear. The stranger continued playing the flute; the tune was melodious and relaxing; this stranger calmly walked towards the site where they were battling earlier.

Suddenly, the flute rang loudly, causing the people around him to clutch their ears for dear life as if their eardrums were about to explode. He then covered all the holes in the flute with all ten fingers, as he gathered energy and blew into it with force. A ferocious gust of wind burst out from the other end of the flute, searing towards Second Madam Ye's face.

Shocked, Second Madam Ye turned around and evaded the blow; as she did so, she felt one end of the flute pressing at her throat.

Both movements were frighteningly quick; even for a person with such speedy reflexes like Second Madam Ye, she was rendered quite helpless when faced with such a situation. Raising her waist slightly, she forced herself to retreat many feet backwards. As she did so, she suddenly hurled Shan Shan's body downwards while extending her arms, trying to grab the metal flute.

Before the infant touched the floor, the stranger wearing huge robes threw out his sleeve; they curled around the infant and lifted it, harmlessly.

The very moment when Second Madam Ye's hand grabbed the metal flute, she felt as though she were holding a burning piece of coal! She gasped in shock and leapt backwards, releasing the flute immediately as she did so; she wondered whether the flute was coated with poison.

The stranger flung his sleeves; Shan Shan's body flew steadily towards Zuo Zi Mu.

Second Madam Ye glanced sideways and noticed the stranger's palms was as scarlet as blood.

Her eyes widened in surprise. *The flute was actually not coated with poison at all; instead, it was his internal energy all along which made the metal flute burn as though it had just came out of a furnace.*

Retreating a few steps in fear, she laughed, "This mister's kung fu is indeed almighty, it is unimaginable that such a small country like Dali have such a powerful figure. May I ask for your honorable name?"

The stranger returned a faint smile. "It is such an honour to have Second Madam Ye's arrival here at our tiny boundary. It is fortunate, indeed fortunate of us, and hence we, the citizens of Dali, should welcome you gracefully as your host."

Surprise and happiness welled inside Zuo Zi Mu's heart as he hugged his son tightly, blurting out, "Your excellency must be Lord... Lord Gao?"

The stranger did not reply, instead he returned another faint smile, before facing Second Madam Ye and inquired her politely, "Where is Mister Duan? Please do tell."

"I do not know his whereabouts, and even if I do, why should I tell you?" sneered Second Madam Ye.

With that, she sprang into the air; her soaring body was about to land onto the peak of a mountain nearby.

"Halt!" The wide-robed stranger cried, his body soaring after her.

Suddenly, several gleaming lights dazzled before his eyes. Upon closer look, they were in actual fact seven to eight hidden projectiles speeding towards him in mid-air - each of them aiming for the various acupoints on his head.

Waving his metal flute swiftly, the stranger made every single projectile drop simultaneously onto the floor below. It was, however, too late to apprehend Second Madam Ye as she took this opportunity to escape. Her shadow weaved and flashed about, and it was impossible to catch her anymore

owing to the now huge distance between her and himself. He turned to look at the "hidden projectiles" on the ground; they were in fact a variety of mere accessories that a child has on him or her. There was a longevity tablet, mini-lock, gold and silver items, etc.

"These are objects of the many children she has killed. If this menace isn't removed, heaps of infants will fall prey in the country of Dali." He mused.

Chu Wan Li waved the metal handle in his hands. The soft rope uncurled itself, sending the sword flying towards Zuo Zi Mu, hilt facing him. Embarrassed, Zuo Zi Mu extended his arm and caught onto his sword. Under such embarrassing circumstances, he couldn't say a word.

Chu Wan Li then turned around to ask Mu Wan Qing, "What has truly happened to Mister Duan? Had he really been killed by Yun Zhong He?"

These people seem to be Brother Duan's friends, I'll better tell them the truth, and we shall go search for him at the other side of the cliff. Mu Wan Qing thought. As she opened her mouth to speak, she heard somebody crying out anxiously from the waist of the mountain, sounding half-dead, "Miss Mu... Miss Mu... Are you still there? Divine Croc, here I come, I beseech you not to hurt Miss Mu! Regarding the matter of acknowledging you as master, we shall discuss that in the future... Miss Mu, Miss Mu, are you alright?"

The wide-robed stranger and the military officers cried in joy. "Young Master is here!"

During the long suffering wait for Duan Yu for seven long days, the emotional agony in her heart was able to rival her physical pain; until now was she finally able to hear his voice again; as surprise and relief overwhelmed her, she lost consciousness.

Everything is in a state of blur. Mu Wan Qing heard someone calling softly, anxiously into her ear.

"Miss Mu, Miss Mu, please... please wake up!" All feelings and memories flooded back into her mind. She began to

gain consciousness, and soon found herself in the arms of somebody. Somebody was hugging her tightly, she instinctively tried to jump away from this person's arms, but then a thought entered her mind: This must be Brother Duan. Her heart was full of sweetness, yet at the same time she tasted bitterness, and as she slowly opened her eyes, she saw a pair of clear eyes, like that of a river during autumn.

Who else could it be besides Duan Yu?

His voice was full of relief. "Ah, you have finally awakened!"

Tears rolled down Mu Wan Qing's cheeks as she raised her hand and gave him a painful slap. However, she continued to lean on his body, as her now depleted body made leaping out of his arms impossible.

Carressing his own face, Duan Yu laughed, "You fierce lady! How dare you hit me for no reason?" Later, he added, "Where is Divine Croc? Wasn't he waiting for me earlier?"

"He has been waiting for you for seven days and seven nights, wasn't that enough? He left."

Upon hearing these words, Duan Yu looked as though he was revitalized; he cheered gleefully. "Excellent! Excellent! I was in such a loss earlier, if he was to force me to become his disciple, I... I don't know what I am supposed to do."

"Since you are unwilling to become his disciple, why bother coming here?"

Duan Yu replied in surprise. "Eh? You were held hostage by him, right? If I am not to come, won't he be going to harm you then? How could I let this happen?"

Sweetness filled Mu Wan Qing's heart, her following words in stark contrast to her feelings. "Hmph! You, totally evil and heartless creep, why haven't you search for me during these seven days?"

Duan Yu sighed, "I was held captive and couldn't escape. However, I thought of you whole day and night everyday, the anxiety in my heart was tormenting me so badly. The moment I could escape, I went searching for you immediately."

*

That very day when the Divine Croc abducted Mu Wan Qing, leaving a flustered, agonised Duan Yu alone at the mountain peak.

I'd better beg that villain to keep me under his tutelage; in this case Miss Mu's life wouldn't be in such danger, Duan Yu thought. But if I were to become a disciple of that villain, and learn that noisy-cracking neck-breaking skill, things will become terrible. After teaching me these skills, he would get me to perform this horrid skill on innocent people, and I will be breaking the necks of one after another, that is totally horrible! Fortunately, this villain is quite reasonable, albeit cruel and vicious, if I were to debate with him once more, there is a possibility of getting him to release Miss Mu and not keeping me under his tutelage.

As he paced back and forth, his mind was filled with a never-ending stream of thoughts; suddenly, he felt a pain in his abdomen. A thought struck him. *Aiyoh! This is not good! How could I have forgotten? I have already acknowledged Dear Goddess as my master, so I'm a disciple of Xiao Yao Sect. As a disciple of Xiao Yao Sect, how can I change sects? Right, I am going to reason with that villain, and I must hear him say once again 'This makes sense'.*

What if, he suddenly thought, that villain wanted me to display the kung fu of Xiao Yao Sect, I couldn't do anything at all; the Divine Croc surely wouldn't be convinced of my being a disciple of Xiao Yao Sect.

Dear Goddess had instructed me to practice the divine martial arts in that scroll thrice everyday--morning, afternoon and night. However, having experienced the most

dangerous and busiest times of his life, he barely even touched it. *I deserved death*, he mused.

Guilt-stricken, he reached into his robes to pull out the scroll. Suddenly he heard footsteps from behind; as he turned to look, he gasped in shock. In front of him were a huge crowd of very familiar people, all of whom were walking along the side of the cliff.

The first person was the leader of Divine Farmer Clan, Si Kong Xuan. Behind him stood Zuo Zi Mu, the leader of the East Faction and Xin Shuang Qing, leader of West Faction of No Measure Sword. The rest were disciples of the three Sects. The sight of everybody crowding together puzzled Duan Yu. Weren't these people fighting their all with each other earlier? *Not bad*, he thought, *these guys were finally able to convert their enmity towards one another into one of friendship*.

The huge crowd of people made two rows at each side of the cliff, as they bowed courteously, as though awaiting the arrival of someone of high power and authority.

Shades of green flashed; eight ladies appeared, all of them leaping up the side of the cliff. They all wore a emerald cape that had a large vulture embroidered onto it.

I am going to die, Duan Yu thought in fear. He could recognise the clothing the ladies were wearing, anytime.

Four ladies stood at each side. One more lady dressed in green walked up the peak of the mountain. She was only in her twenties, her facial features clear and beautiful. However, her eyebrows seemed to conceal a murderous air. She glared at Duan Yu and snapped, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Duan Yu felt immense relief upon hearing these words. *This lady has yet to know it was me and Miss Mu who had killed her four friends and attempted to disguise ourselves as the sacred heralds of the Nimble Vulture Palace. Since that cape has been wrapped on the obese Granny Ping, and Miss Mu's cape has disappeared into the Lan Cang River,*

these ladies have no evidence at all, so I can easily push away all charges made against me then.

"I am Duan Yu from the country of Dali, and had once become a guest in Mister Zuo's No Measure palace with a friend of mine...."

"Buddy Duan," Zuo Zi Mu interrupted hastily. "No Measure Sword has currently been submitted to the great subordinates of Nimble Vulture Palace. No Measure Palace has now been renamed No Measure Cave; hence the three words 'No Measure Palace' will now cease to exist."

What a brilliant idea, Duan Yu thought amusedly to himself, *now that you were defeated by others, you admitted defeat and surrendered!*

"Congratulations! Congratulations!" Duan Yu smiled, "Mister Zuo has finally forsaken the dark side and has now seen the light! This is something worth celebrating..."

When have I been in the "dark side", and what "light" have I seen? Zuo Zi Mu thought to himself; however, these words cannot be spoken aloud; all he could do was to return a forced smile.

Duan Yu continued, "I have earlier witnessed a misunderstanding that occurred between this Leader Si Kong and Leader Zuo, and had attempted to clear the dispute. Unfortunately, things were messed up even further: I had to retrieve an antidote under the orders of Leader Si Kong. Little did I expect to meet the Divine Croc Yue Number Three, who said I am of high intelligence and forced me to become a disciple of his. I told him I know no kung fu, yet this villain was such an unreasonable creep; he abducted me and brought me here, and gave me no other choices besides acknowledging him as my master. I feel so helpless..."

Following that, he bowed courteously and said, "How am I to escape from this impossibly high precipice? Answering Missy's question pertaining to what am I doing here, I just have to say I am awaiting death."

Nothing Duan Yu has just said was false, the earlier part of what he had said was true, the later part was not false in every aspect; all he did was to omit a huge portion of what happened in the middle.

Confucius omitted the words "Spring Autumn" in his work, he narrates but doesn't create it, Duan Yu mused. Omitting portions of text is not against the way of the sages, only when one lies then he wouldn't be a true gentleman.

"En," the lady replied softly, before continuing, "So the Four Villains have indeed arrived at Dali. What kind of 'high intelligence' do you possess which made Yue Number Three wants nothing better than to make you his disciple?"

Before the reply came, her gaze swept towards Sikong Xuan and Zuo Zi Mu and inquired, "his words aren't false, are they?"

"Indeed, " Zuo Zi Mu replied.

"Reporting to Sacred Herald," Si Kong Xuan spoke, "This lad knows no kung fu, all he knew was to create a mess out of everything."

"According to the both of you, there were two creeps who had the audacity to disguise as my sisters and escaped to this peak. Where are they?" The lady spoke, once again turning towards Duan Yu. "Mister Duan, did you happen to see two ladies dressed in a green cape just like us?"

"Nope," Duan Yu replied. "I have not seen anybody dressed up like you, sister."

The two impostors disguising as you people weren't "two ladies", Duan Yu thought, searching for an excuse to justify his statement so as to not make it a lie and go against his principles: They were a man and a lady, and without a mirror, I can't see how I look like, as for Miss Mu, she is only "one" lady, not "two ladies".

Nodding her head, the lady turned towards Si Kong Xuan and said, "You must have been a subordinate of Nimble Vulture Palace for quite a long time?"

Si Kong Xuan replied tremulously, "Yes.... I have been a subordinate for — for eight years...."

The lady spoke again, "What a fool you have been, not even able to recognize us sisters. What help can you do for Kid Nanny? Regarding this year's antidote for your Life-Death Insignia, you won't have any hope."

A despondent look fell over his ashen face; he knelt on the floor and began kowtowing to the lady as he begged, "Have mercy Sacred Herald! Have mercy Sacred Herald!"

This goatie hasn't died yet; Miss Mu must have given him some fake antidote, or did the people from the Nimble Vulture Palace give him some miraculous medicine? Duan Yu thought in puzzlement, and what on earth is the "antidote for Life-Death Insignia"?

Ignoring Sikong Xuan, the lady turned her attention towards Xin Shuang Qing. "Bring Mister Duan down with you. If the Four Villains dare to create any trouble, tell them to find me at Obscure Peak, Nimble Vulture Palace! I shall leave the matter of apprehending the two impostors to the people of No Measure Cave. Hehe.... What audacity! Those two traitors Gan Guang Hao and Ge Guang Pei must be brought back and slain. If any of you sees my four sisters, inform them to return to Nimble Vulture Palace, I shan't wait for them any longer."

Every sentence she spoke, Xin Shuang Qing replied a nod, making sure her eyes do not meet the lady's ones. After she finished speaking, the lady walked down the peak herself without even giving a final look at the crowd. The eight women accompanying her followed closely and left.

Si Kong Xuan was kneeling on the floor all this while, the moment the nine women left the peak, he immediately leapt towards the side of the cliff, yelling "Sacred Herald Fu, please pass this message of mine to Kid Nanny, Si Kong Xuan has let her down."

As he said so, he sprang to the other side of the cliff and dived towards River Lan Cang miles below. Everybody called

aloud in shock. Divine Farmer Clan members rushed quickly towards the side of the cliff.

Turbid waves billowed and surged past fiercely; their Clan leader was nowhere to be seen. Many of the clan disciples began weeping and started pounding their chests in agony.

Seeing the way their leader Si Kong Xuan had ended, the disciples of No Measure Sword stared at each other in dismay.

Leader Si Kong's death is partly my fault, a remorseful Duan Yu thought sadly.

"Take care of Mister Duan as you bring him down," ordered Xin Shuang Qing, as she pointed towards two male disciples of the East Faction of No Measure Sword. The two men, named Yu Guang Biao and Wu Guang Sheng, bowed and complied.

Duan Yu finally reached the foot of the hill after a very long walk as he was being hauled by the two men. He took a deep breath and cupped his hands courteously to Zuo Zi Mu and Xin Shuang Qing, saying "I thank the both of you sincerely for escorting me down the mountain, let's part our ways here."

His eyes darted around and he spotted the mountain the Divine Croc was pointing at earlier, as he thought in dismay, climbing up this mountain must be harder than descending that mountain by manifolds. *I doubt the people of No Measure Sword will be that nice to carry me up that hill, I'll just have to save Miss Mu with all I can,* he mused.

To his shock, Xin Shuang Qing said, "Please do not hurry away and do accompany me back to No Measure Cave."

"No," Duan Yu said in alarm, "No, I have many things to do for the moment, I can't comply today. Apologies. Apologies."

"Hng!" Xin Shuang Qing humphed and made a hand signal. Both Yu and Wu immediately stretched their arms and locked his arms tightly with theirs and continued moving ahead.

“Hey! Hey! Leader Xin, Leader Zuo, I have never offended the both of you in any way. That Sacred Herald sister has commanded the both of you to escort me down the mountain, now we have descended the mountain and I have thanked you people. What more do you want from me?”

(Briefly edited by lilchilipepper)

Neither Xin Shuang Qing nor Zuo Zi Mu bothered to listen. Seized tightly captive between Yu and Wu, Duan Yu had no choice save to follow them back to the No Measure Cave.

The two men brought Duan Yu past five houses and through a large garden before stopping in front of three small houses. Wu Guang Sheng opened the door, while Yu Guang Biao pushed him firmly forwards. As soon as Duan Yu stumbled into the house, the door closed behind him with a resounding clicking sound. The door had been locked, and he was now efficiently trapped within.

“How unreasonable can you No Measure Sword people get? How can you all treat me like a criminal? It’s not as if No Measure Sword is the authorities. How could you imprison people for absolutely no reason?” Duan Yu called out.

The noises outside ceased instantly. Despite all of his shouting and screaming, nobody seemed to notice him at all.

Duan Yu sighed, *Since things happened this way, let it be. All I can do now is to await my fate.* The descent from the mountain had exhausted him sorely, and, upon seeing a bed and a table in the room, he immediately reclined on the bed and fell asleep.

Before long, a person came to serve him food; surprisingly, it did not taste awful. Turning to the servant who brought the food, Duan Yu spoke, “Go and report to your two leaders. Tell them I have a word to...” Before he could finish saying what he wanted to say, he heard Yu Guang Biao roaring gruffly outside the door.

“That little lad whose surname is Duan, you had better keep your mouth shut. I could care less whether you want to sleep or lie down, but if I hear just one more sound coming from you, expect no more mercy from us. You speak one sentence, and I will return it with a slap. Two sentences, two slaps, another three will get you three from me. Surely you know how to count?”

Duan Yu instantly fell silent. *These barbarians will truly not hesitate to do something they have threatened. When Miss Mu slapped me, my cheeks were certainly in pain, but there was sweetness in my heart. If these guys slapped me, things definitely would be far different.*

He finished three large bowls of rice and rested on the bed again. *I wonder if Miss Mu is alright now,* he thought in worry. *It would be best if she manages to shoot Divine Croc to death with her poisonous arrows, and then comes to rescue me. Ay, how could I actually hope for her to kill people?*

Another string of thoughts swam around in his head before he finally gave a weary yawn and fell asleep.

This time, he slept until the following morning. Scanning the area around him, Duan Yu noticed that the furniture was crude and simple, as though they were placed here long ago. Metal chains lined the inside of the windows; it could not have been any more evident that this was the place in which the No Measure Sword held captives.

All the thoughts of his current dilemma—namely, locked in a room while pressed for time—vanished as he stared at the cavernous space before him. The first notion that came to his mind was to practice the Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness as Dear Goddess had instructed him.

He reached into his robes, removed the scroll, and placed it on the table. Remembering the nude pictures in the paintings, his heart began palpitating furiously. He straightened his robes and set himself in a meditating position—endeavoring with great difficulty to stop his face

from reddening any further—as he thought silently, *Dear Goddess, I am here to follow your instructions and to practice the divine art you have told me to. I'm not trying to steal a look at your ethereal figure. Forgive me for being disrespectful...*

He slowly unrolled the scroll and began reading the words that appeared behind the first painting. To him, reading these words was as simple as eating rice at home; he skimmed through the words, and he instantly understood the meaning. After the second reading, he had them all memorized, and, by the third time, he had it all inside him. He dared not glance longer than necessary at the exposed paintings; rather he quickly studied the various meridians and acupoints on the picture before commencing his training.

The words on the scroll read: “Our sect’s internal energy is a total contrast to those of other sects, for internal energy cultivated using our methods flows in the opposite direction. As such, those who have already had practised internal energy training must forget those learnt in the past, and start training on the martial arts here diligently. If one has any stray thoughts left in one’s mind, this may lead to two opposite forces clashing with each other, which would immediately result in fire deviation. The victim will go mad and vomit blood, which he or she would then become fully paralyzed; nothing could possibly be more dangerous than this.”

The words repeatedly reiterated this point, emphasizing the severity of the situation. However, Duan Yu never began any internal energy training before; therefore, he could conveniently move on without having to bother with this dangerous stage at all.

Within one hour, Duan Yu had managed to follow the written instructions and memorized all the channels, meridians, and acupoints of the Lung Meridians* correctly. However, his body did not possess even the slightest trace

of internal energy; as a result, he naturally would not be able to channel his non-existent internal energy to move through his meridians.

(End of editing work)

Following that, Duan Yu commenced his cultivation on his “Ren Meridians”. This particular meridian route begins at the ‘Yin Gathering’ pressure point located in the perineum. The route moves up various pressure points like the ‘Crooked Bone’, ‘Centre Extremity’, ‘Closed Energy’, ‘Rock Entrance’, going past the abdomen, chest, the throat and ends at the ‘Broken Foundation’ pressure point which resides at the space between his lower jaws.

Although there were numerous pressure points along the Ren Meridians, the path of the meridian was entirely straight, which made it easy for Duan Yu to practice. In an instant, Duan Yu memorized the positions and names for the various pressure points. He reached out his hands to touch those pressure points he had just learnt. As it was mentioned in the scroll earlier, he had to cultivate his internal energy through his meridians — in the reverse way. As such, he had to cultivate his internal energy from his ‘Broken Foundation’ pressure point, down the ‘Liquid Receiving’, ‘Incorrupt Fountain’, ‘Abrupt Heavens’ pressure points to his ‘Yin Gathering’ pressure point.

******The words in the painting read: The Ren Meridians and the Lungs Meridians are the cornerstones in the cultivation of our Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness. The ‘Less Merchant’ pressure point located at the thumb and the ‘Shan Zhong’ pressure point between the breasts are the most vital points of our skill, the former collecting internal energy whilst the latter accumulates and stores them.

The human body has four oceans: namely the ‘Ocean of the Water and Rice’ in the stomach, the ‘Ocean of the Twelve Channels’ in the Chong Meridians, the ‘Ocean of Energies’ in the Shan Zhong pressure point, and finally, the ‘Ocean of the Marrow’ in the Brain. The practice of storing food and

water in the stomach is known throughout every human being the moment they were born; hence no special training is needed. However, the marvellous ability to absorb others' internal energy and store it in our own body can only be achieved by our Carefree Sect's Divine Skill of Northern Darkness.

Within a day, food and water collected in the stomach is absorbed and assimilated, however, the internal energy which a human absorbs accumulates after each absorption, becoming thicker and more abundant, resembling that of the enormous Ethereal Lake in the Dark North that could even float a gargantuan sea-monster whose size spans a thousand li.**

Duan Yu rolled the scroll and thought deeply: *This kung fu is purely beneficial to oneself at the expense of others. By absorbing the internal energy that others had practised industriously for years and using it as my own, wouldn't it be as cruel as consuming the flesh and blood of a fellow human being? Wouldn't it be as if I was to purloin the wealth of others and take them as my own, wouldn't I be cheating or doing something illegal then? But I have promised Dear Goddess to practise this martial arts, I can't break my promise.... Never mind, I will not absorb anybody's internal energy in my entire life.*

Another occurred to him: *Uncle had constantly reminded me that when humans were first born into this world, they had neither food nor any clothes, and had nothing to use for survival. Even a bowl of porridge, rice or even a thread of clothing all had to be obtained by something else. The act of obtaining things from somebody else cannot be helped, but the real question is how are we able to repay those who had given us. What we obtained must be minimal, and we must always give out much, much more than what we take in. If one was to take in something from the wealthy and the evil, and give that stuff obtained to the poor and the needy, there would be nothing to feel guilty over; on the other*

hand, it is more of a charitable act done by a kind soul. This golden rule is the same in Buddhism and Confucianism. There is nothing wrong in offering ointment from the affluent to those who badly needs it, so long as my intention was purely for doing something for the needy. Doing as much charity as I can do to every soul under the skies would be like having Buddha in every household. The question is not about obtaining or not obtaining, but rather, to do charity or to do evil.

The moment Duan Yu understood this point, he no longer had any qualms on practising the Divine Skill of Northern Darkness anymore.

Translated by ani411

While Duan Yu had no misgivings in his heart about that matter, he thought again, "In short, I should just do more good deeds in my life and never do bad things. Elephants can carry heavy loads of tons, crickets and ants can only drag little things; if you have a strong ability, you can do great good deeds, but you would also be able to do horribly bad things. With Divine Croc's abilities, if you only do good deeds, wouldn't it be greatly beneficial to everyone?" the moment he thought of this point, he felt that even if Divine Croc was his master, but he only twisted bad people's necks, it will seem as though "This sentence seems to be logical."

The scroll also had ways to cultivate the many other channels and meridians; all of them were for absorbing the internal energy of others. Although Duan Yu had no more qualms about that, he still felt that practicing it went against his personal character, just being greedy of much and determined to meet one's desires alone was already not a good thing and thus, he decided to ignore it.

At the end of the scroll, he saw again "Graceful Steps upon the Waves" these words and immediately thought of the sentences in...

Translated by Pacifian

Duan Yu further unrolled the scroll till its very end, and on it he saw the five words “Graceful Steps upon the Waves”. These words reminded him of a poem he read in the past: The Goddess Luo.

*Graceful Steps upon the Waves,
Dust settles on her gauze stockings....
Passionate fluttering eyelids and vivacious glances;
Euphoria moisturizing her jade-like countenance.
She has yet to say the delicate speech,
Her breath possesses the fragrance of the Tranquil Orchid.
An air of Grandeur and Elegance;
I lost my soul in the presence of such beauty!*

Those unforgettable words of aesthetic elegance created by Cao Zhi flowed gently, unhurriedly across his mind:

*Voluptuousness, Slenderness – flawlessly combined, she is;
Complementing elements of loftiness and daintiness,
Sculpted shoulders,
Waist of delicate silk,
Ravishingly long neck with a lovely chin,
Her unblemished substance now revealed,
Her fragrance needed no further enhancing,
Cosmetics, totally redundant!
Her hair flailed loftily like the clouds,
Her slender brows arched slightly, gracefully.
Radiant, sparkling lips of vermillion,
coupled with spotless teeth brimming with freshness.
With captivating, crystal-clear glances,
Those two alluring dimples on her cheeks,
A posture of magnificence and carefreeness,
A demeanour of tranquility and elegance.
With tender passions and graceful manner,
Words just cannot depict her charm....*

The moment he thought of Dear Goddess’ elegant posture, he recalled again a few verses:

*Pure as the twilight – the morning sun;
Dazzling as the lotus sprouting from nature's waves!*

To him, following Dear Goddess' instructions is the happiest and most blissful thing to do on Earth. Even if he was to die a hundred times, suffer ten thousand trials and tribulations, he would not regret the tiniest bit. I shall practice this "Graceful Steps upon the Waves" first, Duan Yu mused, since this is a skill to flee and not to harm others, learning it would only bring good and no harm.

All steps were clearly illustrated in the scroll; given its wealth of details, not even a single positioning of the sixty-four trigrams of the Scripture of Changes has been missed out. Ever since Duan Yu was young, he had already familiarized himself with the Scripture of Changes, therefore felt no difficulty in learning these steps.

However, the footwork on the scroll is inconceivably weird. After moving a step, it was impossible to progress onto the next one. It was only until when Duan Yu thought of somersaulting into the air, could he finally be able to form a miraculous, yet strangely natural connection between the two steps. There were even weirder cases: such as leaping forwards and backwards, or fleeing to the left and dodging towards the right, only so could he be able to follow the instructions written in the scroll.

The moment the enormous potential behind his bookworm-ish nature is unleashed, he found immeasurable joy in analyzing, and eventually solving, any problems with an insurmountable level of difficulty. Such is the joy that he was unable to express his feelings at that moment, he thought unconsciously: *Never did I once expect to find such pleasure with no limits in martial arts; this is definitely not beneath studying books and memorizing scriptures.*

In this way, a day has passed. He has grasped roughly twenty to thirty per cent of the intricacies of the footwork illustrated in the scroll. After dinner, he learnt more ten-odd steps before retiring to bed. In his semi-consciousness, the

myriad of thoughts floating in his mind comprises the terms of the various acupoints such as: 'Less Merchant', 'Shan Zhong', 'Closed Energies' and 'Centre Extremity', along with other Scripture of Changes' trigrams like 'Concording People', 'Great Possessing', 'Converting The Maiden', 'Not-yet Fording' and so on.

During midnight, Duan Yu was awoken by a sudden series of thunderous croaks, each sounding like a 'Jiang-ang' noise. Not long after, another series of similar croaks ensued. The sound was similar to the mooing of a cow, but there were elements of melancholy and absolute misery to it. Duan Yu wondered what kinds of animal can produce such noises, but then again, he remembered that strange beasts and venomous insects are aplenty on Mt. No Measure. As soon as he heard the croaking noises died down, he could not care any less about the matter and slept soundly as soon as his head touched the pillow.

Somebody spoke nearby. "The 'Venomous Crimson Bullfrog' hasn't appeared for quite some time, but now, it suddenly croaked again tonight. I wonder whether this means good or bad for us."

Another voice replied. "Our East Faction has been reduced to such a miserable state; things can't be anymore good for us. We owe our lives to heaven if this bad news isn't so extreme."

Duan Yu knew those two disciples that spoke were Yu Guang Biao and Wu Guang Sheng. They must be sent to sleep in the room near mine so as to prevent me from escaping, he thought.

Wu Guang Sheng's voice can be heard once more. "We, the No Measure Sword, have already belonged to Nimble Vulture Palace; even though this spells the lack of freedom for us, as we are now being controlled by those of higher authority, we could at least have a powerful backing. So, all in all, we have half of each: good and bad. However, what I truly cannot stand is this: The West Faction has always been

inferior to us, why did that Sacred Herald pass the position of No Measure Cave to Senior Martial Uncle Xin, leaving us at their beck and call?”

“What else could we do? Everybody — Heavenly Mountain Kid Nanny included — in Nimble Vulture Palace is female, and they say we guys aren't in the least bit trustworthy. Sacred herald Fu is considered kind enough: by placing Martial Uncle Xin as our leader, Nimble Vulture Palace will view us in a new light. Watch how cruelly Sacred Herald Fu has dealt with the Leader of Divine Farming Clan, as compared to her treatment of Martial Uncle Xin, they are miles apart!”

“This, I don't understand,” Wu Guang Sheng said. “Senior Apprentice Brother Yu, why did Sacred Herald Fu treat that lad so courteously? She addressed him as ‘Mister Duan’, ‘Mister Duan’, doesn't that sound a little too affectionate?”

Hearing his name being mentioned, Duan Yu erased all temptations of sleeping from his mind, and began to listen more attentively to the ongoing conversation.

He heard a laugh - Yu Guang Biao's voice. “These words can only be said here in secret. A young maiden, politely calling a white-faced lad ‘Mister Duan’, ‘Mister Duan’....” The moment the three words “Mister Duan” were spoken aloud, he pressed his windpipe and the results were immediate: he spoke using a tone similar to that of Sacred Herald Fu, with the addition of some tenderly whining created by none other than he himself.

“Guess what's going on?”

Wu Guang Sheng spoke excitedly. “So ... so Sacred Herald Fu is infatuated with that white-faced lad?”

“Keep your voice softer,” Yu Guang Biao cautioned. “Don't wake that little white-faced kid.” Following that, he laughed. “I am not the ‘sacred’ parasite residing in Sacred Herald Fu's stomach, how am I to understand her intentions? I guess Martial Uncle Xin must be thinking along these lines too, no

wonder she made us keep a close watch on him, preventing his escape.”

“How long must we keep him here?” Wu Guang Sheng asked.

Yu Guang Biao responded, “Sacred Herald Fu said on the mountain peak, ‘Xin Shuang Qing, bring Mister Duan down with you. If the Four Villains dare to create any trouble, tell them to find me at Obscure Peak, Nimble Vulture Palace.’” These words were spoken once again using the tone of the lady dressed in green.

He continued further, “So what if we brought Mister Duan down the mountain? She wouldn’t explain further, nobody dare query her. Suppose if one day Sacred Herald Fu sent people over here to pass on a message: Xin Shuang Qin, bring that Mister Duan up Nimble Vulture Peak to meet me. And it all happens that that little white-faced lad was killed by us, or set free, wouldn’t things be disastrous for us?”

Wu Guang Sheng asked. “What if Sacred Herald Fu was to forget this entire matter, aren’t we supposed to keep that white-faced lad in here for ever, just to wait for Sacred Herald Fu’s instructions?”

Yu Guang Biao laughed. “That’s right.”

Duan Yu’s heart was filled with cries of ‘T’is bad’. This Sacred Herald sister by the surname of Fu addressed me as “Mister Duan” merely because she saw me as a scholarly man, hence was slightly more courteous in her speech, Duan Yu thought, flustered. *Where have you guys been thinking all these rubbish? Even until my beard has grown white and I am still under prison, that Sacred Herald sister wouldn’t even think of seeing me, this white-faced oldie.*

As Duan Yu was lost in his thoughts of worry, he heard Wu Guang Sheng speak again. “Then wouldn’t the both of us be —”

His words were cut off completely, by three thunderous ‘ji-ang’ croaks. Clearly, that Venomous Crimson Bullfrog was croaking again. Wu Guang Sheng kept his mouth tightly

shut. After a long while, when he was finally certain that the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog did not croak any further, he continued, "Every time the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog croaks, my heart would leap like mad and I would have goose bumps all over. I wonder how many lives the God of Plague would want to claim this time round."

Yu Guang Biao said, "Everybody called the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog the creature of transport of the God of plague; that would be merely a saying. The Manjusri Bodhisattva rides a lion; the Samantabhadra rides on a white elephant; the Lord Supreme rides a green ox.... This Venomous Crimson Bullfrog is the king of all poisons, its powers are divine and all-reaching, and the formidableness of its toxicity is known throughout many generations. Calling it the creature of transport for the God of Plague simply wouldn't be enough!"

"Senior Apprentice Brother Yu," continued Wu Guang Sheng. "How do you think that Venomous Crimson Bullfrog looks like?"

Yu Guang Biao grinned. "Why, aren't you interested in finding out?"

"That would be something you've got to tell me after you have seen it." Wu Guang Sheng said, returning the grin.

"The moment I spot the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog, the toxic gases it emitted would instantly blind my eyes. Following that, it would creep into my brain. By then, I'm afraid I wouldn't have much time left to describe the looks of the King of All Poisons for you to know. How about having the both of us take a look?"

With that said, footsteps were heard, followed by the sound of someone unlocking the door.

Wu Guang Sheng was immediately seized with fear. "Don't... Don't kid..." His trembling voice was easily noticeable. He rushed over to the door and locked the door again. Yu Guang Biao laughed at the sight.

“Hahaha! Now, really, you didn’t for a moment think I would actually dare to take a look? Have a look at how laughably frightened you have become.”

Wu Guang Sheng was still recovering from the shock. “This joke had better not be played, or else certain things we wouldn’t want to happen really do. Let all be peaceful. Let’s go to sleep!”

Yu Guang Biao changed topic. “You guess whether that immoral couple – Gan Guang Hao and Ge Guang Pei – managed to escape?

“We haven’t heard the slightest thing about them for so long, most probably they did manage to escape after all.”

“I know *everything* about Gan Guang Hao’s capabilities. That person is greedy and lazy and flirtatious — he is totally uninterested in practicing swordplay; all that he is capable of would be to sweet-talk ladies. All of us combed the whole of North, South, East and West; even the Sacred Herald from Nimble Vulture Palace came here personally to search for them. Yet, in the end, that couple managed to escape. I just can’t believe this.”

“However much you disbelieve, you just got to.”

Yu Guang Sheng was deep in his thoughts. “I say, this couple must have been hiding deep inside the mountains, and met the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog.”

Wu Guang Sheng gasped loudly in surprise; even the most insensitive of people could sense the dread in his voice.

Yu Guang Biao continued. “Yes. They must be searching themselves silly for a deserted area to hide themselves in. Yet, the moment they ran into the the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog, their brains would be filled with those toxins and hence, got themselves dissolved into a bloody heap as a result. No wonder we couldn’t find them.”

Wu Guang Sheng said, nodding, “You’ve got a point there.”

“What do you mean I have got a point?” Yu Guang Sheng snapped. “If they hadn't ran into the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog, then there wouldn't be anymore points left, would there?”

“Perhaps they couldn't tolerate it any more. Deep inside the deserted mountains or ridges, they started doing this thing and that thing. And in the midst of all darkness, they unleashed the move ‘Flipping the carp over’ and oh, how could it be? – they fell into somewhere miles deep into the valley!”

At this point, both men started cackling nastily.

Duan Yu sank deep into his thoughts: *At that food stall Miss Mu shot both Gan and Ge to their deaths, how could it be that the No Measure Sword disciples weren't able to find them? Hmm... Right. It must be that the stall owner was afraid of attracting trouble, so he quickly buried the corpses somewhere. So when the No Measure Sword disciples came to investigate, everybody naturally kept silent, seeing their fierce looks and their weapons and all.*

Wu Guang Sheng spoke again, “The East and the West Factions of No Measure Sword merely lost two disciples. How big a matter could it be? The Emperor isn't in the least worried yet the eunuchs are. Why would the Sacred Heralds of Nimble Vulture Palace be so anxious? Why must they be in such a hurry in apprehending those two people?”

“This, you need to use your brains more to find the answer.”

Silence ensued. “You know my mind isn't in the slightest quick. After thinking this to that, here to there, I just couldn't figure it out.”

“Let me pose you a question, then,” Yu Guang Biao said: “the Nimble Vulture Palace is so keen on taking over our No Measure Palace — why is this so?”

Wu Guang Sheng was lost in his thoughts. “Senior Apprentice Tang once said, the reasons most likely have something to do with the No Measure Jade Wall. The very

moment Sacred Herald Fu arrives here, she would enquire non-stop about the divine silhouette, swordplay, and everything else up the No Measure Jade Wall.” After an afterthought, he added, “That’s right! All of us had to abide by the instructions Sacred Herald Fu set for us – the swearing of oath of never to divulge the slightest thing about the divine silhouette at the Jade Wall; yet both Gan Guang Hao and Ge Guang Pei had already escaped from No Measure Palace. Neither of them made the oath! There is no telling whether they wouldn’t mention it to the outside world!”

At this point, he slapped his thigh in revelation, exclaiming, “Right! Right! Nimble Vulture Palace went through all this effort just to silence those two rascals.”

“Hush! Don’t make so much noise; there is somebody next door, have you forgotten?” Yu Guang Biao whispered warningly.

An abashed-looking Wu Guang Sheng nodded. “Indeed, indeed.”

For a moment, neither spoke. Finally, Wu Guang Sheng broke the silence. “That rat Gan Guang Hao sure has infinite blessings; having the fortune to cuddle Ge Guang Pei, such a white and fleshy little cute gunnysack in his arms; having the luck to skin her as if she were a sheep.... Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. Damn it. Even if he really did get dissolved into a bloody mass, he didn’t... didn’t really.... Hehe...”

From then on, the two men’s conversation has been reduced to a lowly mixture of vulgarities and obscenities. Duan Yu was unwilling to eavesdrop any further, but the lewd and dirty jokes and laughs continually coursed through the wall separating them – much to Duan Yu’s dismay; so trying to shut the noises away was impossible. The only way out for him would be to concentrate on the various channels, meridians and acupoints. Indeed, all it took was a short while of deep concentration, and the

vulgarity nearby vanished without a trace as if they had been switched off, no matter how loud they were.

The following day, Duan Yu continued his training on the 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves'. He followed the footwork illustrated in the scroll very closely, and began trying them out step by step. This footwork was either inclined to the left or slanted to the right: none of the steps taught was to advance and retreat directly. Even though he was confined to a small area, all he need was to remove the table and chairs and he could perform the footwork without any obstructions; after a period of training, he had learned more than ten steps.

Suddenly, an idea struck him. *Later, when somebody comes to give me lunch, all I need is to perform these weird, diagonal steps and it would take me no time at all to move round him and escape past the door. It is unlikely that he would be able to catch me. By then, I would be able to escape this place instantly and avoid the horrible fate that awaits me if I stayed - wait till the day I became an Oldie White-faced?*

He was brimming with joy as he thought about this. *I must train this set of footwork very diligently to the extent of total familiarization, he thought firmly, Should I take a wrong step by accident and fail to escape, they might shackle my legs together from that point onwards to prevent me from escaping. By then, even how delightfully incredible 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' might be, every step I take would be restrained by the metal chains; I will really have to become Oldie White-faced no matter how much I dread it.*

Lost in thoughts, Duan Yu involuntarily made dizzy circles with his head.

Without further ado, he speedily ran through the hundred-over steps he had learnt in his head. "I need to reach a stage whereby I need not even think about the steps

in my mind; the mere lifting of my legs would result in a rapid succession of the following steps.”

Suddenly, he sighed. “I, Duan Yu, a stinky male, had to learn those graceful and delicate ‘Graceful Steps upon the Waves’ from the Tranquil Lady Goddess Luo. What qualities of ‘Dust settles on her gauze stockings’ do I possess? More likely mine’s a poor imitation in the form of ‘Dust settles on his naked bottom’, I guess.”

Chuckling merrily at himself, Duan Yu stepped on the position of ‘Central Confirmation’, followed shortly by an immediate turning towards the ‘Already Fording’ spot. What he didn’t expect was that the moment he changed positions from ‘Exultation’ to ‘Venom’, a sudden blast of blazing energy surged upwards – towards his *dantian*, paralysing him instantly. His body rocked forwards as he lay resting against the tabletop – lifting a finger suddenly became an impossible feat.

Feeling stupefied, Duan Yu attempted to grasp the table by its sides and lift himself; little did he know that not a single of his muscles or bones complied. Not even a tiny finger. His current situation was reminiscent of a horrible nightmare gone wrong: the more anxious he was, the more helpless he became.

He had absolutely no idea that ‘Graceful Steps upon the Waves’ is an extremely profound branch of martial arts. The reason for this skill being taught near the end of the scroll was for the practitioner to master ‘Divine Skill of the Northern Darkness’ and absorb fairly substantial amounts of internal energy before he or she could start training on the intricate footwork.

Every single step of the ‘Graceful Steps upon the Waves’ was designed as such that when a step was made, the momentum and movement of the practitioner’s entire body blended entirely and intimately with his or her internal energy; it amounts to much, much more than the mere lifting of limbs and moving about. Duan Yu had hardly any

internal energy. Before then, he would always make a step before a momentary pause, with which he used to contemplate the next step. Then he would follow by retreating another step, which he then paused to think again. As such, he has had consistent intervals of rest in his blood flow, therefore no such obstructions occurred.

This time, however, he had memorized the steps and even attempted to try them all at once in one single breath; the blood flow in his channels and meridians went topsy-turvy, paralysing him in the process. In fact, he almost suffered from fire-deviation. Fortunately for him, he only moved a few steps, and was trying it out at a comfortable pace; therefore the extent of internal injury hadn't reached the fatal stage of the utter destruction of his own channels due to the immense blood pressure.

Flustered, Duan Yu struggled even harder to move; but the more he did so, he felt the suffocating pressure at his chest and abdomen intensify. To add to all these, he began feeling somewhat nauseous, but he could hardly vomit. He let out a sad sigh, ceased struggling and allowed nature to take its course. As he did so, the frustratingly painful feeling inside him began to subside.

Lying immobile against the table, Duan Yu saw the scroll in front of his eyes. Having nothing else to do, he studied those unfamiliar steps he had yet to try and thought them out in his mind, imagining himself trying them out step by step. About an hour later, he had learnt another twenty-odd steps, and to his surprise, the pain in his chest had almost fully dissipated.

It was almost noon. Duan Yu had finally understood all the steps that were illustrated in the scroll. In his mind, he decided to try them out by imagining himself starting on 'Bright Concealment', moving along several other positions like 'Adornments', 'Already Fording', 'Dwelling People'; and eventually completed stepping – or rather, imagining himself stepping – on the positions of all sixty-four Trigrams

and ended nicely on the position 'Without Embroilments' after moving in the direction of a huge circle.

The fact that he had finally completed learning the entire footwork was overwhelming; ecstasy welling inside him, Duan Yu leapt into the air clapping his hands, exclaiming in delight. "Amazing! Amazing!"

The moment these two words left his lips, Duan Yu realised he could finally move again. Unknown to him, his internal energy had unconsciously followed the thoughts in his head; as he completed one full cycle of 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves', his blood flow did the same, unclogging blocked meridians in the process.

He could barely contain his excitement and surprise that were threatening to burst from within. In his head, he tried to go through all the positions of the sixty-four Trigrams in his head a few more times. For fear that he might commit the same mistake as before; he moved each step very slowly -- every step made had to be followed by a few deep breaths.

In this way, all sixty-four positions had been completed. Duan Yu saw that he had finished one huge circle; meanwhile, his body was bursting with renewed vitality and vigour. Unable to bear his excitement any longer, Duan Yu gave a cry in joy.

"Amazing! Amazing! Utterly amazing!"

From outside the door, came a roar of annoyance. It was Yu Guang Biao's voice. "Why are you screaming your head off? Whatever your old man, I, have said, I don't eat them back! You say a sentence, you eat a palm!"

Having said that, he unlocked the door and flounced inside. "Earlier, you made three sentences, so you shall eat three palms! However, on account that you are a first-time offender, I shall discount you two slaps; just one palm would suffice."

He advanced threateningly towards Duan Yu, his right palm poised to strike Duan Yu's cheek.

This palm didn't contain any hidden stances beneath it; neither was it anything special. But Duan Yu, lacking martial arts, couldn't block it with his arms. Slightly tilting his head to one side, Duan Yu instinctively moved his feet diagonally and landed on the position of 'Swallow' from his current position, 'Well'. And voila! Duan Yu managed to evade the slap.

Yu Guang Biao was furious. He thrust out his fist forcefully and rapidly towards Duan Yu. Meanwhile, Duan Yu was still contemplating which step to move (he has hardly familiarised himself with the 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' footwork) when the blow struck his chest with a loud *peng*. The fist has struck his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint.

The 'Shan Zhong' acupoint is vital to the human's body. The moment Yu Guang Biao threw out his fist, he instantly regretted his actions and feared he might inflict too heavy a damage for Duan Yu to handle; if anything happens to Duan Yu, he might not be able to account for it.

What he did not expect, however, was that the moment the fist came in contact with Duan Yu's chest, Yu Guang Biao felt his arm suddenly depleted of energy. What was even worse was that he felt some sort of emptiness in his heart! Yu Guang Biao could barely register this strange phenomenon when everything reverted back to normal. Seeing Duan Yu unhurt, Yu Guang Biao, relieved, said, "Although you have managed to dodge my slap, your chest received my knuckle sandwich; that still counts as one slap."

With that he disappeared from view as he left the room shortly after. Clunk! The door was locked once again.

The strike might be loud, but strangely enough, Duan Yu felt absolutely no pain in that strike. Unknown to him, whatever energy that was present in Yu Guang Biao's fist earlier has been transferred into his 'Ocean of Energies' in

his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint, where it will be stored permanently.

It just happened so coincidentally. Had Yu Guang Biao's fist struck anywhere except his chest, Duan Yu would have been considered extremely lucky to have avoided injury, yet no matter what, he would not be spared from the excruciating pain. However, the 'Ocean of Energies' in his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint was the exact location where the 'Pure Energies of Northern Darkness' would be accumulated and stored.

The number of times he had tried cultivating this skill is too little; he has zero foundation in this skill. It would thus be impossible for him to perform the various feats needed to absorb internal energies from other sources at this stage: using the 'Less Merchant' acupoint to leech the internal energies of other people, channeling these energies via his Lung Meridians up to the 'Sky Shock' acupoint in his Ren Meridians, and sending them once again for permanent storage in his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint. Even if he had reached that stage after plenty of training, he would rather die than to do what he considers an immoral act – stealing stuff from others' for his own benefit.

In this case, however, it was the other party himself who had forced his own internal energies right inside Duan Yu's 'Shan Zhong' acupoint. Duan Yu could not resist the energy transferring process; the moment the fist touches the chest, the internal energy would gain entry into his body. It was as though gold coins and gold bars flew towards his backpack from outside the heavens, yet, the foolish lad was oblivious to all this. In fact, he even thought: *What an unreasonable brute. How much could a few sentences of 'Amazing!' offend him so much? He hit me for absolutely no reason.*

The internal energy that was originally Yu Guang Biao's continually revolved and vibrated in Duan Yu's 'Ocean of Energies'. In an instant, Duan Yu felt his chest tighten. He immediately thought of the two channels in his body – the

Lung Meridians and the Ren Meridians, and the effect was immediate: a faint warmth began to spread throughout these two channels. It circulated the channels once before dissipating back into the 'Shan Zhong' acupoint, bringing the pain along with it.

Unbeknownst to Duan Yu, the tiny warm circulation he has just experienced in just a short time had earned him some amounts of internal energy, which, upon storage, can no longer leave his body.

From a helpless lad without the tiniest trace of internal energy, Duan Yu finally acquired a little. All these began thanks to Yu Guang Biao's forceful punch at Duan Yu's chest.

Also, Duan Yu should thank heavens for the fact that Yu Guang Biao's internal energy was mediocre, and that he had not put in all his energy in that single strike. Had it been a martial arts expert the likes of the Divine Croc who struck his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint instead, Duan Yu, having no internal energy foundation at all, couldn't immediately absorb all force into his 'Ocean of Energies'; when that happens, his meridians and channels would have all been destroyed into smithereens, and he would die immediately after vomiting huge amounts of blood. Also, the amount of internal energy Yu Guang Biao lost is too slight – he hasn't noticed anything.

Right after lunch, Duan Yu got down very quickly to his 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' training. Each step he moved, he would take in a deep breath, followed by another step, and from there the cycle goes on. Sixty-four Hexagrams were completed in no time. Duan Yu felt no paralysis in his muscles, and speculated that so long as he maintains a constant, uninterrupted series of smooth intervals in his breathing, there wouldn't be any harm.

His second try was bolder than before: two steps before taking in a deep breath; rinse and repeat.

'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' is indeed an extremely profound skill. It enables its practitioner to cultivate internal energy through kinetic motion. One round of stepping all

sixty-four positions would enable his internal energy to revolve smoothly around his body, leading to a slight growth of internal energy with every round made.

Duan Yu, however, barely knew that he was cultivating internal energy; he only wished he could familiarize himself with the footwork even better with every round, or that he could move at a quicker pace. “Earlier, when that Brother Yu tried to slap my face, I managed to dodge it by moving from ‘Well’ to ‘Swallow’. Following that I should keep it up by sliding to the position of ‘Venom’, in this way could I be able to evade that punch on my chest. Regrettably, I was busy thinking what step I should move when his fist struck. This ‘busy thinking’ suggests that I am not fully familiarized with this skill yet. Should I want to depend on this footwork and escape this place without being caught, I must immerse myself into this skill till any further training is pointless; every step made must be done without thinking. The phrases ‘busy thinking’ and ‘without thinking’ have only one dissimilar word, but it makes a world of difference between life and death.”

Immediately, he trained himself even more arduously on the footwork once more. Every day, from morning to night, with the exception of daily needs such as eating, sleeping and using the toilet, the rest of the time was spent on moving repeatedly in huge circles.

There were times when he thought: *The only reason I am practicing this skill so hard is merely to escape this horrid place and rescue Miss Mu; I did not abide by Divine Goddess’s instructions and train the ‘Mystical Skill of Northern Darkness’.*

Guilt-stricken, Duan Yu spared some time to cultivate the Lung and Ren Meridians. He did so reluctantly and shoddily; all he wanted was to peace his mind. As for the rest of the channels and meridians, he shelved them aside temporarily.

After several days of training, Duan Yu made marked improvement in his ‘Graceful Steps upon the Waves’. He

need no longer count his steps and breaths, and could now glide to next step with rapid ease. To top it all, he suffered no more obstructions in his internal flow. As he moved, his mind and heart relaxed. Several lines from the poem 'Goddess Luo' came to mind – those that were related to the 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves':

She resembles the concealed moon behind the frail clouds; her floating grace, the returning snow from the flowing wind.

The body suddenly gains freedom; to roam the world, to enjoy life.

The Divine Brilliance converges and unites: the emergence of light and darkness.

The body, light as a feather, stands upright like a crane; seems ready to fly yet but has yet to.

Her body is as swift as a soaring teal; floating rapidly – goddess-like.

Movements without following norms: maybe perilous, maybe safe; Irregular movements and pauses: maybe departing; maybe arriving.

These last twenty words are easily the cruxes of this complex footwork. Although Duan Yu understood this point, trying to reach the realm of 'Movements without following norms: maybe perilous, maybe safe; Irregular movements and pauses: maybe departing, maybe arriving' would require God-knows-how-much diligent practice needed, not to mention how many years and months Duan Yu would have wasted just to acquire this phenomenal accomplishment.

Given his current martial arts, should his enemies stretch their hands and try to grab him, Duan Yu knows not of his chances of success in evading them. He has half a mind to stay for a couple of days to half a month to improve his chances of success. However, he realised that he had been separated from Mu Wan Qing for seven whole days; he thought of her having to accompany the unreasonable

Divine Croc for so long, where every single day felt like years. Duan Yu finally decided to leave this place that day. He wished the servant bringing in food had better not know any kung fu; escaping this place would therefore be much easier.

Sitting on his bed, Duan Yu locked himself in deep concentration, refreshing his memory on the 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' while awaiting patiently the arrival for the servant. Finally, he heard the sound of the door being unlocked coupled with loud footsteps, and he saw the servant bringing in the food. Duan Yu walked towards him unhurriedly.

It all happened in a split second. Duan Yu quickly toppled the plates of food over the servant's head. *Ping! Ping! Pang! Pang!* And rice and bowls and vegetables and plates rained heavily down the poor fellow's head....

'Aiyoh!' The poor servant screamed in horror.

Wasting no time, Duan Yu rocketed out of the door in just a few steps.

Unfortunately, Yu Guang Biao happened to be guarding outside the door. Hearing the servant's scream, he rushed inside without delay. The narrow doorway caused both men to crash into each other on their way in, or in Duan Yu's case, out.

Duan Yu hastily leaped towards the position of 'Beholder' from his current ('Preparation') in a bid for not wasting anymore precious time. Unfortunately for him, however, while on his way out, his left foot landed on the doorstep.

Duan Yu was instantly overwhelmed with shock and confusion. Nowhere in the instructions under 'Graceful Steps under the Waves' taught him 'What to do in the case of stepping on the doorstep, which results in one foot higher than the other?'

He stumbled, struggling with might to step on the position of 'Comparison'. Till this day, never in his wildest dreams could he dream that he would step on Yu Guang

Biao's foot! 'What to do when you accidentally step on others' feet, causing others to scream in pain and fury?' was also not recorded in the secret footwork manual!

Duan Yu thought depressingly: *Well, the Goddess Luo's 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves' in the Luo Waters embodies the 'sleekness and elegance of a swan in startled flight' and the 'restrained grace of a roaming dragon', certainly she wouldn't land herself in drastic situations such as stepping on doorsteps and crushing the feet of others.*

In his fluster, Duan Yu felt someone's fingers closing over his wrist. The next moment he was dragged back inside by a fuming Yu Guang Biao.

All hard work over the last few days has come to naught. Things just had to happen against his wishes. Filled with resentment, Duan Yu raised his right hand to prise his left wrist away from Yu Guang Biao's grip. However, the five fingers encasing Duan Yu's wrist felt like iron; they simply refused to budge.

Suddenly, Yu Guang Biao made a 'yi?' sound in surprise. His fingers felt enervated and were about to release his grip in no time. Yu Guang Biao circulated his internal energy into his arm and held on firmly, but in no time at all, his fingers were weakened by an invisible force.

"Damnit!" He cursed.

He imbued more internal energy into his arm; only to find that this time, his entire arm drooped downwards. He wasn't aware that in Duan Yu's endeavour in forcing him to release his grip, Duan Yu had accidentally used his own thumb to prise Yu's thumb away. In this way, both 'Less Merchant' acupoints of the two men had connected themselves. As he used his energy to hold onto Duan's wrist tightly, whatever energy applied has flowed continuously into Duan Yu's thumb. Unknown to him, every bout of internal transference into his arm would result in a loss of internal energy.

Duan Yu was clueless about what was going on. He only felt Yu Guang Biao's fingers relaxed and tightened

inexplicably. It seems almost as if by using more strength Duan Yu could prise away Yu Guang Biao's fingers and make an escape. But at this point of time, how was he to know how to remove his right thumb from between his left thumb and Yu Guang Biao's thumb?

That fateful day when Yu Guang Biao punched him hard in the chest, all the internal energy in his fist has been transferred into his 'Ocean of Energies'. Although the internal energy in Yu Guang Biao's punch was too little to be even noticeable, Duan Yu has used whatever little of these energies to clear the path in his Lung and Ren Meridians. Now, whatever energy Yu Guang Biao has on his body began moving along these channels slowly into Duan Yu's 'Ocean of Energies'. This fitted exactly the 'Mystical Skill of Northern Darkness's' theory of converging a hundred streams to form an ocean meant.

If both men did not use any energy at all and merely touched each other's thumbs instead, Duan Yu wouldn't be able to unleash the 'Mystical Skill of Northern Darkness' as he did not know how. This time, however, both men were fighting for their lives. It was similar to the previous scenario wherein Yu Guang Biao struck his chest; in both cases, Yu Guang Biao had forcibly inserted his own internal energies down Duan Yu's 'Ocean of Energies'. This can be likened to a scenario of pouring wine to a cup; even if the wine cup was unable to tolerate the wine, it simply cannot do anything.

Initially, Yu Guang Biao's internal energy was way more abundant than Duan Yu's. Had he understood what was happening and released his hold on Duan Yu immediately, the most Duan Yu could do would be to leave this place and escape. But Yu Guang Biao was under strict orders by his superiors to prevent Duan Yu from escaping; how could he let this white-faced dolt leave so easily?

His arm went numb again; Yu Guang Biao tried to replenish it with more internal energy. However, he felt that his one arm was no longer able to hold on any more. He

stretched out his left arm in an attempt to assist his right one. Unknown to him, this only made the flood of internal energy gushing out of him flow even faster. Shortly afterwards, half of his internal energy has been transferred into Duan Yu's body.

One is losing energy; the other increasing. Yu Guang Biao's strength was no longer Duan Yu's match. His internal energy cascaded out of his thumb even more rapidly as time passes. Eventually, his energy leak was like that of water from a reservoir bursting out from a dam: spewing in enormous quantities at an alarming rate. He could no longer do anything except to helplessly watch his energy drain away and himself wither. He tried desperately to release his hand and escape this nightmare, but he couldn't: this time, it was Duan Yu who grabbed his five fingers firmly in place, unwilling to let go; try as he might, Yu Guang Biao simply couldn't do anything given his depleted strength.

The person who was once the captive suddenly became captor; yet, he was oblivious of this at all. In a frenzy, Duan Yu held on to Yu Guang Biao's for dear life: he didn't realize his struggle for 'prising away his fingers' had suddenly became 'grabbing tightly onto his fingers'.

Yu Guang Biao was on the verge of collapsing. Fearful, he screamed, "Junior Wu! Wu Guang Sheng! Come quickly! Come quickly!"

Wu Guang Sheng happened to be at the toilet at that time. Hearing his senior apprentice's voice, he rushed towards Yu Guang Biao without a moment's hesitation. A hilarious scene, indeed, watching him totter hastily while clutching onto his pants.

"This lad wanna escape. I — I can't do anything to stop him!" Yu Guang Biao yelled.

Wu Guang Biao no longer cared about his pants; he released them and prepared to hurl himself at Duan Yu.

Yu Guang Biao saw this and immediately cried out, "Get me out of here first!" He sounded as if he was about to cry

soon.

"All right!" Wu Guang Sheng replied. He stretched out his arms and held on firmly to Yu's shoulders, trying to yank him away from Duan Yu. At the same time, he asked, "Are you injured?" *Given Yu Guang Biao's martial arts, how couldn't he handle this sissy scholar by himself?* Wu Guang Sheng thought, puzzled.

The words barely left his lips when he felt his both arms ached painfully - it was as if there weren't any energy left in them! He quickly mustered his strength into his arms. But all the energy he summoned was gone almost as soon as they entered his arm.

What happened in fact was that Duan Yu had leeched Yu Guang Biao's internal energy dry; now he further proceeded to absorb Wu Guang Sheng's one. Yu Guang Biao's body now became the path for transferring Wu's internal energy over to Duan Yu.

Seeing more people rushing over to Yu Guang Biao's aid, in addition to Yu Guang Biao's tenacious grip closing over his wrist suddenly becoming more rigid, a terror-stricken Duan Yu used even more force if possible to prise away Yu Guang Biao's fingers. Wu Guang Sheng, sensing his limbs began to ache for no apparent reason, kept calling out, "How strange! How strange!" Even as he said so, he did not release his hold a single bit.

The servant bringing in food for Duan Yu saw all three men lay in a mess on the floor, coupled with blanched faces belonging to Wu Guang Sheng and Yu Guang Biao, who looked almost as if they were about to collapse any time soon. He fumbled out of the room by crawling over their backs, screaming, "Somebody, come quickly! That white-faced lad by the surname of Duan is trying to escape!"

The disciples of No Measure Sword nearby heard the cry and rushed over immediately. Two men appeared at the scene, followed shortly by another three, all bellowing in unison. "What happened? Where's that kid?"

Duan Yu was crushed under both Yu Guang Biao and Wu Guang Sheng; naturally, the newcomers could not spot him.

Yu Guang Biao couldn't even catch his breath; to him, speaking was a total impossibility. Wu Guang Sheng already had eighty per cent of his internal energy drained away; he could only choke, "Senior Brother Yu is... trapped by that laddie.... Come... come and help quickly...."

Two disciples immediately leapt forward; each of them grabbing Wu Guang Sheng's arm each and started pulling with all their might. However, as they pulled, they felt their arms became suddenly devoid of energy. Both men's internal energies were now flowing through Wu Guang Sheng's body into Yu Guang Biao's body, which would then later flow right inside Duan Yu's thumb. Currently, Duan Yu's 'Shan Zhong' acupoint had already accumulated both energies of Yu and Wu; now, with the tiny portion of energy collected from the two newcomers, his internal energy had surpassed the energies of the two men put together. Once the men felt their arms ache, they instinctively channeled more energy to their arms. Yet, the more they did so, the more presents they forced down Duan Yu's thumb.

As the amount of internal energy Duan Yu collected grew, his internal energy absorption accelerated too. Initially, his internal energy growth was that of tiny droplets; now they flushed like water streams.

The other three disciples stood there, dumbstruck. One of them laughed, "What childish game are you guys playing? Stacking the Arhats?"

He moved forwards to heave his fellow disciples. Little did he know by his second pull, his entire arm glued itself to the arm of his fellow disciple! He shrieked in astonishment, "This is demonic! Devilish!"

His fellow disciples who were still standing behind him rushed over to his side and too began pulling. All three of them pulled with all their might; the stack of human bodies moved ever so slightly, and the next thing they knew, a

pang of ache coursed through their wrists and arm. Instantly, they felt themselves enervated by Duan Yu's draining force.

A huge pile of No Measure Sword disciples lay at the doorway of the room where Duan Yu was earlier held captive. The weight of their bodies crushed Duan Yu so painfully he could barely breathe. Seeing that it was impossible to escape, he had no choice but to surrender himself.

"Let go of me! I am not leaving anymore!" He yelled.

It was no use. The other parties' internal energy just had to surge into his body; Duan Yu felt his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint nearly bursting with all the myriad of energies churning inside him. The pain in his chest began growing more intense by the second.

He stopped trying to prise Yu Guang Biao's thumb; however, Yu's thumb was crushing his thumb so forcefully that he couldn't move. He screamed again, "I am going to be crushed to my death! I am going to be crushed to my death!"

Yu Guang Biao and Wu Guang Sheng looked lifeless; the five disciples who came trying to prevent Duan Yu from escaping were flabbergasted and at a loss of what to do. Seized by a sudden bout of panic attack, they struggled and pulled with more strength. As they did so, their internal energy gushed out at an even faster rate.

Eight men huddled together messily; six were screaming their voices hoarse, yet none of them was able to hear what the other was yelling. After a while, it became four people yelling out loud. Shortly after, the number of people shouting has been reduced to three. Eventually, Duan Yu was the only person yelling, "You are crushing me to death! Let go of me! I want to escape no more!"

Every cry he made, the pain in his chest subsided a little. To lessen the pain even further, he continued raving like

mad, his voice hoarse yet his energy abundant. The more he shouted, the louder he became.

Suddenly, somebody bellowed, "That evil witch stole my baby! Everybody, chase after her, quick! The four of you guard the door; the three of you, guard the rooftops; you four guys, seal the East Door; those five, guard the West Door. Don't – don't let that evil witch bring my kid away!" Although it sounded like a command, the voice sounded fearful and anxious.

Duan Yu immediately recognized the voice as Zuo Zi Mu's. *What woman stole his child away?* Duan Yu thought. A thought struck him. *Ah! It had to be Miss Mu! She stole his son and wanted to use it in exchange for her husband. This 'exchange for the general with the horse' tactic is useful for sure.*

Finally, he stopped yelling. It was at this point he was aware that Yu Guang Biao's fingers that were closing over his wrist had relaxed. He struggled and heaved with all he could; the seven people lying over him tumbled to the ground, one after another.

Duan Yu felt immensely delighted. *Their master's kid has been snatched away by Miss Mu; now everybody's mind is in a whirl and frenzy. None of them could bother about catching me any longer,* he thought. Crawling out from under a pile of human bodies, Duan Yu wondered, *why aren't these people lying immobile on the floor? Yes. They must be fearful that their master would punish them severely, hence they pretended to be injured.*

He must be very intent on escaping, to the point that he had no idea how weak the logic in his conjecture was. Finally, he got the freedom he wanted so much; his legs sprinted so quickly as if there were wings attached to them. Never in his dreams would he ever have dreamt that all the internal energy of the seven disciples has now become his own

The distance he covered was disproportionate to the footsteps he took; he reached the back of the house in no time at all. The assorted positions such as 'Not-yet Fording', 'Already Fording' were all discarded at the back of his mind. The elegant postures of 'Concealed Moon behind the Frail Clouds; returning snow from the flowing wind' turned into garbage created by Cao Zi Jian. Duan Yu ran amok like a dog which owners have died, and frenzied as though he were a fish that was trapped in a net where there is a gaping hole large enough for it to escape.

No Measure Sword disciples had their swords ready and were scampering in all directions, yelling as loud as their lungs would allow. "Don't let that evil witch get away!" "Quick! Snatch our little junior apprentice back!" "You go there! I'll go this way!"

Miss Mu's 'exchange for the general with the horse' tactic is ingenious; now it even became 'attracting the tiger to leave the mountain', Duan Yu thought gleefully. *Now I must employ the thirty-sixth tactic.*

He dived into a dense patch of grass, and crawled more than ten zhang away. He thought inwardly: *My hands and feet are touching the ground at the same time; what other skill am I using if it isn't the '(un)Graceful Crawling upon the Waves'?*

The noises and yells decreased in volume; seeing that no one has noticed him, Duan Yu finally stood up and fled to the dense forest at the back of the mountain. Even though he was running for a long long time, he felt just indescribably energetic. He found it very strange and warned himself: Better not be so scared; otherwise I would run until all my energy has depleted.

A large tree stood nearby and he took the opportunity to rest under the shade. But he felt spirited and full of vigour; what's there to rest when he had too much energy to spare?

When people get lucky, they would feel as if their bodies were packed with dynamic energy; still, they will break

down eventually, Duan Yu thought.

He remembered the instructions stated for the 'Vibration' Trigram, number six two: Don't chase; harmonize after seven days. Suddenly, he remembered: Today is the seventh day of my captivity! I must be careful of the two words 'Don't chase', Duan Yu thought warily. He circulated the internal energy collected in his 'Shan Zhong' acupoint to the Lung Meridians; however, he just had too much internal energy. Back and forth the energies went; there were simply no end to it all.

He suddenly became frightened. "This isn't good", he told himself, "There must be some danger awaiting me." Since the pain in his chest has now fully dissipated, he ended his internal energy circulation, stood up and started walking again. He thought: *how am I to meet Miss Mu to tell her I am no longer in danger? I must also tell her to return the baby to Zuo Zi Mu; otherwise he would care for his son too much and live with fear from then onwards.*

Walking a few more li, Duan Yu suddenly heard the sounds of something going 'ji' 'ji'. A grey shadow flashed past before his eyes. He saw that it was a tiny animal that soared past him in a speed few animals could ever possess, and vaguely recognized it as Zhong Ling's pet marten Lightning. The object simply leaped too fast for the naked eye to observe carefully. But Duan Yu knew this animal that could travel at lightning speed could only be the Lightning marten.

Duan Yu was pleased at seeing it. He thought inwardly: *Miss Zhong went everywhere yet she couldn't find you; all along you had hid yourself here, I shall bring you back to your rightful owner; she will be too pleased to be able to speak.*

He whistled loudly, imitating Zhong Ling's whistling voice. The shadow flashed. An animal fell from the trees above and sat several zhang in front of him. A pair of quivering, sparkling eyes stared back at him. It was indeed

Lightning. Duan Yu whistled once more; Lightning moved two steps closer and lay immobile on the floor.

“Good marten, good marten. I shall bring you back to your owner.” Duan Yu called out loudly. He whistled again and moved few steps forward. Lightning remained immobile. Duan Yu had touched its back before; he knew this animal was speedy as the wind, and had poisonous fangs; but it obeys its master before everything else. He saw the marten’s eyes continued quivering, and couldn’t help commenting how cute it was.

Duan Yu whistled and moved forward again, before squatting down before the animal and said, “Obedient marten!” He slowly stretched his hand and caressed its back; Lightning lay unmovable on the floor all this while. Duan Yu caressed the marten’s fur, which felt smooth, gentle and soft. In a gentle voice, he spoke, “Good marten, let’s go home!”

That said, his hand went over to carry the marten.

In an instant, his arms trembled, followed shortly by a sharp pain in his left thigh. A gray shadow flashed once more, and Lightning reappeared several zhang in front of him. It stood on the floor, staring back at Duan Yu with its quivering eyes.

Duan Yu shrieked in horror. “Aiyo! You bit me!”

A tiny hole appeared in his left trousers. Duan Yu rolled up his pants and saw two rows of teeth marks imprinted on his left thigh. Fresh blood seeped out from the wound....

He could remember the horrific scene of Divine Farmer Clan Leader Si Kong Xuan slicing off his arm as if it has happened only a few minutes ago; fear gripped his heart and he was so sure his soul was about to leap out of his own body. He cried in disbelief, “You...you.... How could you be so unreasonable? I am your master’s good pal! Aiyoh!”

A pain shot through his left thigh, numbing it. Duan Yu involuntarily knelt down on the floor; his arms held on to the area above his wound, trying – but failing – to prevent the

venom in his left thigh from spreading any further. Sure enough, the same numbing pain that coursed through his left leg did the same to his right thigh. No longer in control of his legs, Duan Yu collapsed onto the floor.

The shock was too much for him to handle; he used his arms to push himself against the floor, trying to get up. Unfortunately, his arms felt numb and enervated. With all the strength he could muster, Duan Yu crawled a few steps forward. Right in front of him, Lightning the marten looked on impassively; all this while, it did not seem to move a single inch.

Duan Yu thought bitterly to himself, *I am just too rash. This marten has been brought up by Miss Zhong; naturally, it would only listen to what she says. It is highly possible my whistle sounds different from hers. What ... what should I do?*

He knew perfectly well the only thing to do to preserve his life would be to follow what Si Kong Xuan did when he was bitten: hack at the injured area with a weapon. However, he hadn't had any weapons with him; moreover, he lacked the courage and instinct of a seasoned warrior like Si Kong Xuan. Furthermore, he had just learnt the skill 'Graceful Steps upon the Waves': without a leg, he could only perform the skill '(Un)graceful one-legged bouncing upon the Waves'. To him, that would have been meaningless.

He sighed and complained for a moment; his limbs gradually became stiffer and more immovable by the second. He knew the venom had spreaded throughout his entire body. Soon, he found himself unable to close his eyes and mouth. He was, however, still aware of his surroundings.

He mused sadly: *If I were to die like this, wouldn't I look ugly? My corpse would have a gaping mouth, would I become an idiot ghost or a hungry one in the future? Fortunately, there is one good news amongst all this bad ones: When Miss Mu sees my grotesque corpse with my*

mouth wide open and my naked bottom, she might vomit at the ugly sight. Perhaps she might think less about me after my death. This would be better for her health.

Three thunderous 'jiang-ang' growls reverberated noisily in the air. Then, came the sounds of *pu pu pu*. Something leaped out of the tall grasses.

Duan Yu froze, dreadfully. *Aiyo! The King of all Poisons, the "Venomous Crimson Bullfrog" is here! Those two men said the moment one sees this creature, his or her own body immediately gets dissolved into a thick pool of blood. What am I going to do?*

And then he thought, *What a silly blockhead I am. Given a choice between turning into a thick pool of blood and dying as a corpse with a wide mouth and a naked bottom, which would be preferable? Definitely the former.*

'Jiang-ang' noises echoed continually in the air; the newcomer has arrived at Duan Yu's right. Duan Yu was unable to look at it as his neck bones had stiffen so badly he couldn't even turn his head; he could only await his fate: to dissolve into a pool of blood.

Pu sounds were made again; fortunately for Duan Yu, the creature suddenly leapt at the direction where the marten Lightning was instead.

No words could describe Duan Yu's astonishment as the creature came into view. It was only a toad – a very tiny one. It couldn't have been longer than two cun*. Its body gleamed a crimson bloodlike colour from top to bottom and a golden aura radiated off its sparkling, glimmering eyes.

It opened its mouth wide; the flabby skin underneath its neck vibrated ferociously. A thunderous croak projected – the 'jiang-ang' noise he has once compared to that of a buffalo's growl. It was incredible how a tiny little creature like that could produce such a sonorous cry. If not for the fact that the creature was right before his very eyes, Duan Yu would never have believed such a phenomenon existed.

He thought inwardly, *No wonder it is called the 'Venomous Crimson Bullfrog'. Its growl resembles a bull's; its body crimson all over; there can't be a better name to describe it. Even so, there must be a mistake going on regarding the rumour going on about dissolving into a pool of blood upon seeing it. Furthermore, the name 'Venomous Crimson Bullfrog' was surely coined by one who has seen it before. How can a pool of blood think of such a suitable name?*

Upon seeing the Bullfrog, the Lightning marten seemed to look slightly apprehensive. It turned his head as if to run, yet it dared not. In an instant it leapt into the air. The Bullfrog widened its mouth, projecting a thunderous 'Jiang-ang' growl, and a faint spray of scarlet mist shot towards Lightning.

Lightning happened to be in mid-air at the time; as the mist struck it, the marten somersaulted into the air and plunged towards the ground. Then suddenly, it pounced forward and sank its teeth into the Bullfrog's back.

In the end, Lightning emerges victorious over the toad. Duan Yu thought proudly.

He was wrong. Just as soon as the thought flashed in his mind, the marten fell limply and lay supine on the floor. Its legs quivered its last, and it would never move again.

Aiyoh! Duan Yu thought sadly. Should he be able to speak, he would have cried out loud. Although Lightning had bitten him to 'death', he knew that it was entirely his fault for rashly trying to tame the marten even when he had neither experience nor knowledge of doing so. As such, he didn't blame the marten at all. Seeing it die before his very eyes, Duan Yu felt miserable. *Sigh. If Miss Zhong knows about this, she would feel so sad.*

He watched helplessly as the Bullfrog leaped onto the marten's body, creeping towards its cheeks and began sucking at it. It started off with the marten's left cheek, followed by its right.

Duan Yu thought to himself: *The Venomous Crimson Bullfrog sure isn't given the title "King of All Poisons" for nothing. The fatal venoms in Lightning's fangs did entirely no effect to the toad; instead, the poor marten got itself poisoned. Now, this Bullfrog is going to extract the venoms in Lightning's toxic glands. Lightning the marten is hyperactive and extremely cute; the Venomous Crimson Bullfrog has a scarlet body and golden eyes, its beauty almost unsurpassable. Who on Earth would suspect that beneath the exterior of such sheer beauty lay a river of venom so thick and deadly.... No, Dear Goddess, I wasn't referring to you....*

The Bullfrog jumped off the marten's body when it's done, letting out two thunderous 'jiang-ang' croaks. Suddenly, soft 'xiao xiao' hisses could be heard. The next instant, a huge centipede swam into view. Its body had brilliant spots of scarlet and black all over; it must have been seven to eight cun long.

The Bullfrog reacted quickly. It pounced at the nimble centipede, but missed it narrowly, as its poor victim was now fleeing for its life. Dissatisfied, the Bullfrog tried again a couple of times, yet none of its attempts succeeded.

It croaked out loud, ready to fire a blast of poisonous mist. Suddenly, the centipede changed its direction mid-way and headed for Duan Yu's mouth, which happened to be wide open

Duan Yu was stunned beyond words. Most unfortunately, he couldn't move. Not even close his mouth. He can't do anything except yell like mad in his mind, *Hey! This is my mouth, brother! Don't be mistaken; it isn't a centipede hole....*

He heard a faint hiss; the centipede crawled unceremoniously up its tongue. Duan Yu almost fainted from the fright. He felt a moving sensation with many, many legs crawling down his throat, and went further down his gullet.

It wasn't long before it disappeared right into Duan Yu's stomach.

Worst still, such catastrophes never end so early. The Bullfrog jumped into the air and landed right on Duan Yu's tongue! Duan Yu felt something icy at his throat, and sure enough, the Bullfrog went inside his stomach to chase after the centipede. Having a rather smooth skin, the Bullfrog slid down his gullet rapidly.

He could hear 'Jiang-ang' croaks emitting from his own stomach. They sounded depressing. Duan Yu felt nothing could possibly be worse – or more hilarious – than this. He wanted to bawl out loud, yet at the same time, felt like bursting out laughing too. However, his muscles had stiffened so badly he could do neither of these.

At this point, tears dropped onto the ground beneath.

Suddenly, he felt a continuous lurching motion in his belly. The pain was unbearable. He wondered whether the Bullfrog had succeeded in catching the centipede, he could only yell out in his mind, *Brother Bullfrog, go and catch the centipede quickly and climb out immediately once you're done. There is nothing fun to do in my lowly stomach.*

A few moments passed, and his stomach finally stopped lurching. Vanishing along with it were the 'Jiang-ang' croaks. The pain, however, had not. Quite the contrary, it seemed to grow even more intense. Another few moments passed and Duan Yu suddenly closed his mouth and his teeth rammed painfully onto his tongue. Under excruciating pain, Duan Yu felt his tongue went back into his mouth.

Duan Yu, feeling surprised, called out loud, "Brother Bullfrog, come out quickly!" He widened his mouth, waiting for it to come out, but even after a long long time, nothing happened.

"Jiang-ang! Jiang-ang! Jiang-ang!" Duan Yu croaked, hoping desperately that the Bullfrog would be attracted to the sound and would then get out from there. However, it appeared as if the toad was oblivious of the sound. Perhaps

... it could tell there's something amiss with the croaks; therefore it was unwilling to be fooled by him and preferred resting in his stomach.

Now unnerved and frantic, Duan Yu inserted his hand deep inside his mouth and tried digging out the Bullfrog. Needless to say, it was impossible for anyone to attempt this. After quite a while, Duan Yu became aware that he could move his limbs again! He stood upright and stretched his back; the paralyzing feeling in his limbs had disappeared without a trace.

"This is strange! This is strange!" Duan Yu remarked aloud.

This King of Poisons must be intending to stay in my stomach permanently; what am I to do if it really decides to treat my stomach as its cosy home? Allow me to congratulate it for its new home. Duan Yu decided.

He did a handstand and supported his legs with a huge tree trunk nearby. He widened his mouth and shook his own body hard for quite a while. Still, nothing happened. It seemed as if the Bullfrog was insistent on using his stomach as a home and had decided to live there till it dies.

Duan Yu was left with no way out. He, however, had a rough idea of what has just happened, *This King of Poisons and that centipede must have become food digested in my stomach. It must be that their venoms have neutralized the marten's venom in my body. To think that I have digested such a venomous creature, and at this point of time my stomach stopped hurting anymore. This sure is very weird.*

He did not know that typical venoms from snakes and toads are only fatal when they come into contact with one's blood. Yet, if they were to be consumed, so long as his of her mouth, throat, digestive tract and the various digestive organs weren't damaged internally, there would be no harm done. Similarly, if he were to get bitten by a poisonous snake, he could suck the venom out of his wound and save his own life.

However, the various poisons and venoms in this world are varied – too varied for one to generalize the whole of them in a single breath. The Venomous Crimson Bullfrog may possess powerful toxins in its body; however, it is absolutely harmless when placed in the stomach of a person. Rather, its body had been dissolved by Duan Yu's digestive juices. To the Bullfrog, Duan Yu's digestive juices are the toxic venoms – it was they which dissolved the poor creature into a thick pool of blood.

Duan Yu stood upright and walked a few steps. Suddenly, his stomach burned as if they were coals in it; a gust of blazing heat had erupted within his abdomen. 'Aiyoh!' He yelped.

The sudden gust of energy rocketed wildly inside him; however, it met with walls everywhere and thus cannot be released away. Duan Yu attempted vomiting it out, but no matter how hard he try, he couldn't succeed.

This time, he took an extremely deep breath and exhaled all the air in him with all he could, hoping that the venomous gas the Bullfrog has dissolved into will too leave his body.

Little did he know that his endeavour to expel the air within him had transformed the blazing heat into a coil of heat, which flowed unhurriedly into his Ren Meridians.

All right, Duan Yu thought, Let us get this done and over with. Brother Bullfrog, you have flatly refused to spare me and tried haunting me – now my 'Ocean of Energies' shall become your place of burial. Whenever you feel like poisoning me, I shall return your favour anytime you wish.

He continued to inhale and exhale deeply. Indeed, he felt the warmth within him channel along the meridians he had cultivated and disappear inside his 'Ocean of Energies'. Soon, he no longer felt anything strange.

Despite his struggling with life and death for so long, Duan Yu felt as energetic as before. He gathered rocks and

sand and piled them onto the body of the dead marten. When he was done, he prayed silently: *Little brother Lightning, I will surely bring your master Miss Zhong to offer her prayers in front of your grave and at the same time offer you some poisonous snakes we could catch. Earlier you bit me unintentionally, I won't tell any of this to your master, for she will berate you if she knows about it - don't worry.*

Out of the woods, Duan Yu saw Zuo Zi Mu running frantically with his sword in position. *He must be chasing after Miss Mu, I shan't not interfere.*

With that, he silently stalked the panicky man. At this point of time he had the combined internal energies of the seven No Measure Sword disciples; following Zuo Zi Mu up the mountain was no difficult task. Besides, Zuo Zi Mu was too bothered for the safety of his child to notice somebody following him.

Fearing that Zuo Zi Mu might suddenly turn behind and act rashly towards him - or perhaps even use this opportunity to hold him hostage for exchange of his child, just like the 'exchange for the general with the horse' tactic Miss Mu employed against Zuo Zi Mu - he maintained a fairly wide distance between himself and the man before him.

Soon after, Duan Yu reached the waist of the mountain. Knowing that his reunion with Mu Wan Qing is coming soon, his heart burned with longing. He, however, feared that the Divine Croc might lose patience and harm her; no longer able to control himself, he yelled out to her at the top of his voice.

** was done with the assistance of Wuxiapedia.

**cun* is equivalent to 3.33 centimetres.

Life-Death Insignia here is in fact Life-Death Talisman in CC's and Han Solo's Translation of Chapter 39, 41 and 42.

Chapter 6: Descendants into the Courtyard

Fan translation by ani411, Pacifian and Ren Wo Xing
[Second Edition]
www.spcnet.tv

Translated by ani411

Duan Yu hugged Mu Wanqing to his bosom, feeling both happy and concerned, he asked, "Miss Mu, how is your injury? Did that evil person bully you?" Mu Wanqing said angrily, "Who am I to you? Still calling me Miss Mu?"

Seeing Mu Wanqing angry, yet prettier at the same time; this seven days he had missed her really badly; he tightened his arms and said gently, "Sister Wan! Sister Wan! Can I call you that?" lowering his head at the same time and kissed her. Mu Wanqing exclaimed, "Ah!" blushed deeply and jumped up saying "There are other people here! How could you...you do that? Aye, where are those people?" looking around, realised that Chu, Gu, Fu, Zhu these four people were gone; Zuo Zi Mu had left with his son, leaving not a single person in their surroundings.

Duan Yu asked, "Who else is here? Is it Divine Croc?" looking frightened. Mu Wanqing asked, "How long have you been here?" Duan Yu replied, "Only for a while. I came up this peak." Mu Wanqing said, "Ok..."mumbling, "This is strange. How come everyone just disappeared in an instant? Suddenly, someone behind a rock recited, "Moving thousands of miles with a sword, daring to speak..." during the reciting, a person came out; it was one of the four royal guards Zhu Dan Chen. Duan Yu said happily, "Brother Zhu!" Zhu Dan Chen walked two steps in front, bowed and replied happily "Young master, luckily you are safe and well, just now what the young lady said made us so anxious!" Duan Yu

made a polite hand gesture and said, "So all of you have met? Why are you...you here? This is too coincidental."

Zhu Dan Chen replied with a smile, "The four of us were ordered to escort young master home, it was not a coincidence. Young master, you are so daring to wander alone in the martial arts world. We went to Ma Wu De's home to find you and also rushed to Mt. No Measure. These few days all of us have been worried enough. Duan Yu replied with a laugh, "I went through quite a lot of suffering too. Uncle and father must be really angry, right?" Zhu Dan Chen replied, "They are of course not very happy. But when we left the two masters' anger had been appeased and they have missed you greatly these few days. After Marquis Shan Chan found out that the four evil ones were coming to Dali, he became worried that young master will bump into them, thus he personally rushed out."

Duan Yu said, "Uncle Gao is finding me too? How can I not feel bad? Where is he?" Zhu Dan Chen replied, "Just now we were all here. Lord Gao chased away an evil woman, heard young master's cries, heaved a sigh of relief and then he ordered me to wait here for young master. Then they went to chase after the evil woman. Young master, let's go back home, so that the two masters will not be too worried. Duan Yu said, "So you...you were here all along?" thinking about how his intimate actions with Mu Wanqing had been seen and heard by him, leading him to blush in embarrassment.

Zhu Dan Chen said, 'Just now I was sitting behind the rock reading Wang Chang Ling's poetry collection, his wu jue "Moving thousands of miles with a sword, daring to speak....Once a man of honour, not breaking his promises..."in these simple twenty words which are unconventional and very worthy of admiration." and took out a book; it was "Wang Chang Ling's poetry collection". Duan Yu nodded and replied, 'Wang Chang Ling's speciality is qi jue, not wu jue. But this literary piece is of high quality. Isn't his other piece: "song guo si cang" even better?' he

then recited "Reflection of the door in the green water, leaving the heart of the master. The bright moon..., the deep spring night." Zhu Dan Chen bowed again and said "Thank you young master." using the poetry lines to change the topic. He used those lines to say that he will, like the others repay young master in death. Duan Yu used those lines to say that as master, he is devoted to his subordinates and will treat them as good friends. Looking at each other, the two of them smiled.

Mu Wanqing did not know poetry and thought "This bookworm has forgotten where he is, he gets so interested once he talks about poetry. This military officer sure knows how to flatter people by bringing a book with him. She did not know that Zhu Dan Chen was of both literary and military capacity and usually read books of poetry.

Duan Yu turned and said, "Miss Mu...Mu, this is Zhu Dan Chen, Fourth Brother Zhu, my good friend." Zhu dan chen bowed with respect and said, "Greetings, Miss Mu." Mu Wanqing returned the greeting and seeing him treat her with respect, was overjoyed and said, "Fourth Brother Zhu."

Zhu Dan Chen said with a laugh, "I do not dare to be called that." thinking "This young lady is really pretty, just now when she slapped young master, she had been so agile, it seems as though her kungfu is not bad. Young master was slapped, yet he still smiled, not caring much. For this young lady, he actually left home for such a long period of time; thus, he must be very infatuated with her. I wonder what the background of this young lady is. Young master is so young and therefore, does not know how dangerous the martial arts world is, he should not be smitten with her beauty, maybe even causing him to lose his reputation." and said with a smile, "The two old masters miss young master and hope that you will go back home immediately. If Miss Mu is free, please go too as our guest." He was worried that Duan Yu would refuse to go home, but if the young lady would go together, he would most likely agree to do so.

Duan Yu stuttered, "What would...would I say to Uncle and Father?" Mu Wanqing blushed and turned her head away.

Zhu Dan Chen said, "The four evil ones have such high martial arts abilities, just now when the Marquis Shan Chan managed to force Second Madam Ye to retreat, it was by the element of surprise and also by luck. Young Master should not be in such a perilous situation, let's leave quickly!" Duan Yu thought of Divine Croc's fierce expression and could not help feeling scared. He said with a nod, "Ok, let's go. Fourth Brother Zhu, since the opponent is so powerful, you should go and help Uncle Gao. I will go home together with Miss Mu." Zhu Dan Chen said with a laugh, "It was not easy to find Young Master; I should personally escort you home. Miss Mu is well-versed in martial arts, but I think she has not recovered from her injury, it will be bad if you meet strong opponents on your way home, and thus it will be better if I go with the both of you."

Mu Wanqing said rudely, "You do not need to be so polite when you talk to me. I am a wild woman that has never studied before. I only understand half of what you are saying." Zhu Dan Chen said with a laugh, "Of course, of course. Although I am a military officer, I like to act as if I am a scholar, this is a bad habit that refuses to go away, please do not blame me, lady."

Duan Yu was not willing to go home just like that, but since Zhu Dan Chen found him, he knew that he would have no choice but to do so; he would just have to try to leave secretly during the journey, thus, the three of them went down the peak. Mu Wanqing wanted to ask Duan Yu where he had gone to during those seven days and seven nights but because Zhu Dan Chen was near, talking was not convenient, thus she had to resist the urge. Zhu Dan Chen brought dried food which he gave the two of them to eat.

The three of them reached the bottom of the peak and after travelling for miles, they found five horses tied to a

tree. It turned out to be what Gu Du Cheng and the others rode here. Zhu Dan Chen led three of the horses to them and after Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing got on the horses, he got on one horse himself and followed them behind. That night, the three of them rested at an inn, each of them taking separate rooms. Zhu Dan Chen then bought a new set on clothes for Duan Yu to change into so that he did not have to suffer the misery of the holes in his trousers.

Mu Wanqing closed the door of her room, staring at the red candle on the table, she sat down, feeling both happy and worried. She thought, "Husband Duan came to find me despite of the danger, showing how devoted he is to me. These few days I have been cursing him, thinking he was heartless; I have misunderstood him. Zhu Dan Chen treats him with so much respect, thus, he must be some important officer's son. I, being a lady, although we have been engaged, should not go to his home for no apparent reason, isn't that awkward? It seems like his uncle and father are very fierce towards him, if they look down on me and treat me with disrespect, what should I do? Hey, I should use my poison darts to kill his whole family, except him." While she was thinking about this, she suddenly heard two soft taps on the window.

Mu Wanqing extinguished the candle flame with a wave of her left hand. Outside the window, Duan Yu said, "It's me." Hearing Duan Yu look for her in the deep night, her heart started pounding and her cheeks started burning, she whispered, "What do you want?" Duan Yu replied, "You open the window and I tell you." Mu Wanqing said, "I will not open." She knew martial arts, yet now she was scared of this weak scholar, it was strange. Duan Yu did not understand why she refused to open the window and he said, "Then you come out quickly and let's leave quickly." Mu Wanqing made a hole in the window paper and asked, "Why?" Duan Yu replied, "Fourth Brother Zhu is asleep, let's not wake him up. I do not wish to go home."

Mu Wanqing was overjoyed, she had been worried about meeting Duan Yu's parents. She then pushed open the window lightly and jumped out. Duan Yu whispered, "I go and get the horses." Mu Wanqing shook her hands and wrapped her arm around Duan Yu's waist before taking a deep breath and leapt over the wall. She then whispered, "Fourth brother Zhu will find out when he hears the sound of the hooves." Duan Yu said softly with a laugh, "Luckily you thought of that."

Holding hands, the two of them started travelling towards the east. After walking for miles, they did not hear anyone chasing them from the back and they were relieved. Mu Wanqing said, "Why do you not wish to go home?" Duan Yu replied, "Once I get home, Uncle and Father will definitely lock me up and I will not be able to go out. It will be difficult even to see you once. Mu Wanqing was very pleased and said, "It's best not to go to your house. From now on, the both of us shall wander in the world, isn't that carefree? Now where do we go?" Duan Yu said, "Firstly, we must not be caught by Fourth Brother Zhu and Uncle Gao. Secondly, we must avoid that Divine Croc. Mu Wanqing said, "True. Let's travel in the northwest direction, it's best if we find a village family where we can lie low for some time. After the injury on my back has fully healed, we would not be afraid of anything anymore." Thus, the two of them traveled in the northwest direction, not daring to slow down, only hoping to leave Mt. No Measure as far as possible.

After they traveled till dawn, Mu Wanqing said, "Those servants in Gusu Wang family must still be looking for me. If we travel during the day, we would be easily noticed. We should find somewhere to rest, daytime, we eat and sleep, nighttime, we travel." Duan Yu did not know much about the martial arts world, thus he replied, "You decide." Mu Wanqing said, "After the meal, tell me where you have been these seven days and seven nights. If you dare to lie to me,

be careful your..." Before she could finish her sentence, "Aye!" she said.

In front of them, three horses were tied to a willow tree in the shade and a person was sitting on a rock, holding a book in his hand, reciting, of course it was Zhu Dan Chen, who else could it be? Seeing this, Duan Yu was very shocked, he grabbed Mu Wanqing's hand and said hurriedly, "Let's go!"

Mu Wanqing was very sure that last night when they secretly escaped, Zhu Dan Chen had found out, he knew Duan Yu did not know qing gong and could not travel fast, he then predicted where the two of them will head and rode on the horse to block their way; she frowned and said, "Blockhead, since we have been caught by him, how can we escape?" then, she walked in front and said mockingly, "Reading in the early morning, you want to be the top scholar?"

Zhu Dan Chen said to Duan Yu with a laugh, "Young master, what poem do you think I am reading?" then he recited "Birds chirp on the ancient tree in the winter, monkeys calling in the desolate mountains, since your eyes are injured, feeling frightened and shocked, isn't it dangerous? Remember the debt of gratitude of your homeland. No two promises,...winning words..., ...in your life, who will determine your title?"

Duan Yu replied, "This is Wei Zheng's 'Xu Huai'? Zhu Dan Chen said with a laugh, "Young Master is of great literary ability, worthy of admiration, worthy of admiration." Duan Yu understood that he was using this poem to tell him that I chased after you despite of everything is because he owes Duan Yu's uncle and father a debt of gratitude, not daring to fail in his mission; he is also hinting that since Duan Yu had agreed to go home, he should not go back on his word.

Mu Wanqing untied the horse and said, "To go to Dali, is the direction we are travelling in right?" Zhu Dan Chen replied, "Since we are free, we travel to the east or travel to the west, we will still get to Dali." The day before he allowed

Duan Yu to ride on the horse with the strongest legs, but now he led that horse to himself, in case the two of them decide to escape on the horses, he will still be able to catch up on the horse.

After Duan Yu got on the horseback, he directed it to the east. Afraid that Duan Yu would get annoyed with him, Zhu Dan Chen kept chatting with him about poetry and books but he did not know about “Yi jing”, otherwise he will be able to cater to Duan Yu’s pleasure. Despite that, Duan Yu was already in high spirits and kept talking a lot. However, Mu Wanqing could not join in the conversation. Not long after, they reached the main road and after they travelled till noon, they stopped at a shop to eat noodles.

Suddenly a shadow flashed past and a tall and thin person walked in the door, once he sat down, he hit the table and called, “Wine and beef, quick, quick!”

Mu Wanqing did not need to look at his face; she only heard how his voice was suddenly low and suddenly high, very unpleasant to the ears, before she knew that “Desperate Evil” Yun Zhong He had arrived, luckily her face was facing towards the inside, not towards him. She then stuck her finger into the soup and wrote on the table, “The Fourth Bad One”. Also using the soup, Zhu Dan Chen wrote on the table, “Leave quickly! Don’t need to wait for me!” Mu Wanqing pulled Duan Yu’s sleeve and the two of them walked into the inside. Zhu Dan Chen moved swiftly into a dark corner.

When Yun Zhong He just reached the shop, he had been staring intently at the main road; when he heard someone moving behind him, he turned back and saw Mu Wanqing just disappearing behind a cupboard and then he shouted, “Who is it? Stop there!” He got up from his seat, his long arm trying to grab Mu Wanqing’s back.

Holding a bowl of soup, Zhu Dan Chen suddenly rushed out from the dark corner and exclaimed, “Ah Yo!” pretending

to lose hold of the bowl; a bowl of hot soup splashed towards Yun Zhong He. Not only were they quite near to each other, Zhu Dan Chen was also quick in the splashing and there was no space in the little shop to move around, thus, even though Yun Zhong He did turn around and avoided half of the soup, the other half of the soup still splashed on his face; instantly, his vision blurred and in his anger, he attacked Zhu Dan Chen, hoping to scratch open his chest. But once the bowl left Zhu Dan Chen's hands, he had conveniently taken a table and threw it together with the bowls, plates and cups towards Yun Zhong He. Yun Zhong He's five fingers stuck into the table and with strong force, the bowls, plates and cups flew towards him.

Meeting a strong enemy in a small shop, even though he had strong kungfu, he was still in a flurry. He quickly tried to spread his inner energy over his whole body, those plates and bowls that hit him all bounced back but he was still dripping with soup, making him look very embarrassing. Outside the door, there was the clatter of the hooves, two people were leaving, riding on horses towards the north. Yun Zhong He wiped the soup from his eyes with his sleeve, suddenly, he felt something flying towards his chest. He took a deep breath and his chest contracted a few centimetres and his left palm attacked from the air and turning it, he caught the judge's brush that the enemy had attacked with. Zhu Dan Chen quickly wielded his inner energy, hoping to snatch it back. His inner energy was not strong enough, this seizing originally would not have succeeded, and a favourite weapon would have certainly landed into the hands of the enemy, luckily Yun Zhong He's hands were oily and his fingers were slippery, thus, he could not hold it tight enough and Zhu Dan Chen actually managed to get back his weapon.

After many moves, Zhu Dan Chen knew that the enemy had good reflexes and strong kungfu, thus, he shouted, "The person with the metal stick and the person with the broad

axe, block the door quickly, the bamboo pole would not be able to escape!" He had once heard from Zhu Wan Li and Gu Du Cheng that that night they had met a bamboo pole-like person and with the strength of the two of them, they had managed with an effort to win, thus, Zhu Dan Chen tried to make an empty show of strength. Yun Zhong He did not know that it was a trick and thought, "Oh No! The person with the metal stick and the person with the broad axe are lying in ambush outside, I am alone, one against three, I will definitely lose!" thus, he did not want to fight, immediately, he rushed into the backyard and leapt over the wall. Zhu Dan Chen shouted, "The bamboo pole is escaping, quick, chase after him, we must not let him escape this time!" rushed to the horse, got on it and chased after Duan Yu.

Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing galloped many kilometres on the horses and then slowed to a trot. Not long after, Zhu Dan Chen managed to catch up with them. The two of them stopped their horses to wait for him, about to question him, when Mu Wanqing cried, "Oh No! The person is chasing after us!" on the road, there was a bamboo-like person darting here and there towards them.

Zhu Dan Chen said, "That person's qing gong is so good!" and whipped Duan Yu's horse, the three horses galloped even more quickly. In an instant, had left Yun Zhong He far behind. After many kilometres, Mu Wanqing heard the gasping of breath of her horse and had to slow down. However, once she slowed down, Yun Zhong He would be able to catch up with her. Although he could not sprint as fast as a horse, he had really high endurance.

Zhu Dan Chen knew that his ploy had been seen through by Yun Zhong He; empty showing of strength was not going to work anymore. He knew that within twenty kilometres, he will definitely catch up with them. Once they reached Dali City, obviously they will not be afraid of anything but the three horses were galloping slower and slower and the situation was getting desperate. After galloping for some

kilometres, Duan Yu's horse suddenly kneeled down, throwing Duan Yu off. Mu Wanqing jumped off her horse and before Duan Yu had reached the ground, she had already grabbed him and jumped back on to her horse. Zhu Dan Chen was far behind them, so as to defend them against the enemy, thus, when Duan Yu fell off the horse; he was unable to save him, seeing Mu Wanqing saving him at the last moment, he could not help saying, "Good skills!"

Suddenly, Zhu Dan Chen was attacked behind. He used his judge's brush to fight off the iron fingers. Yun Zhong He used the momentum to scratch the horse's back until it was dripping with blood. The horse felt painful and galloped even faster. It was not long before there was a long distance between them and Yun Zhong He. However, now there were two people riding on one horse and one horse injured; it was difficult to maintain this for long. Zhu Dan Chen and Mu Wanqing were secretly anxious.

On the other hand, Duan Yu did not know the severity and asked, "Is this person very powerful? Surely, it does not mean that Fourth Brother Zhu cannot defeat him?" Mu Wanqing shook her head and said, "It is a pity I am injured and cannot use my strength to help Fourth Brother Zhu to fight against the evil person." suddenly, she had an idea and said, "I pretend to fall off the horse and get injured. Then I lie on the floor and catch him unaware by shooting two darts at him, it may work. You ride on the horse and just go, do not need to wait for me." Duan Yu was very anxious and using his left hand to grab her neck and his right hand to grab her waist, he said, "No! No! How can I let you take the risk?" Mu Wanqing's face turned red and said, "Blockhead, let go of me! Fourth Brother Zhu can see us!" Duan Yu was shocked and said, "Sorry! Don't be offended." Mu Wanqing said, "You are my husband, why say sorry?"

While they were talking, they turned their heads and saw Yun Zhong He getting closer and Zhu Dan Chen kept waving his hand, asking them to escape quickly. Then he leapt off

his horse and blocked the way. Although he knew he was not the match of Yun Zhong He, he still had to block him, so as to prevent him from catching up with Duan Yu. Unexpectedly, Yun Zhong He only wanted to catch up with Mu Wanqing, suddenly, he ran diagonally into the fields at the side and bypassed Zhu Dan Chen, running straight towards Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing.

Mu Wanqing kept whipping the horse but it was already vomiting white foam and was about to die. Duan Yu said, "If only we were riding your Black Rose, I am sure that evil guy would not be able to catch up with us." Mu Wanqing said, "Do I need you to remind me of that?"

That horse went over a hill and in front of them was a straight road, no place to hide. In the west, within the green willows, next to the small lake, there was the side of a yellow wall exposed. Duan Yu said happily, "Good! Let's go there!" Mu Wanqing said, "No! That is a dead end and there is no road to escape." Duan Yu said, "You listen to me, I would not be wrong." Using the reins to turn the horse, they headed towards the green willows.

As they got nearer, Mu Wanqing realised that that wall was actually a monastery and "Yu Xu Monastery" seemed to be written on its signboard; thinking quickly, "This blockhead escaped until here where there is no other road. I should hide in a dark corner and shoot the bamboo pole with a dart." in the blink of an eye, they had reached the front of the monastery, suddenly, they heard someone laughing behind them, it was Yun Zhong He who was only metres away from them.

Duan Yu shouted, "Mother, mother, come quickly! Mom!" Mu Wanqing got angry and snapped, "Blockhead, shut up!"...

Yun Zhong He laughed, "It would not be of any use now even if you call for your grandmother or grandfather now." and leapt towards them. Mu Wan Qing placed her left palm on Duan Yu's back and summoning her energy, pushed him,

calling, "Run into the monastery!" At the same time, she waved her arm and a dart shot out, heading behind her. Yun Zhong He dodged it, and seeing Mu Wanqing leap off the saddle, used the iron fingers in his left hand to grab her shoulder. Mu Wanqing quickly shrunk from his attack and went under the horse's stomach and at the same time, shot three darts one after the other. Yun Zhong He dodged left and right, leaping backwards to avoid them.

At that moment, a nun walked out of the monastery and she, seeing Duan Yu groaning as he picked himself up from the ground, went forward and used her arm to help him up, laughing, "Mischievous again, so much shouting and wrangling!"

Mu Wanqing saw that although the nun was older than Duan Yu, she was pretty, and was actually so intimate towards Duan Yu, and Duan Yu himself was using his right arm to hug the nun's waist, and even had a very happy expression on his face. Seeing this, she could not help feeling very jealous, and she, who could not care less about the strong enemy behind her, went forward and used her palm to strike the nun, yelling, "Why are you holding his arm? Let go of him now!" Duan Yu called frantically, "Sister Wan, do not be rude!" Hearing Duan Yu side with the nun, Mu Wanqing became even more angry, and even when her feet had not reached the ground, she had added more energy to her palm.

The nun waved her horsehair whisk and its end made a circle in the air, catching Mu Wanqing's wrist. Mu Wanqing felt that the strength in the horsehair whisk was really quite great. Next, she was pulled by it and could not help taking a few side-steps before she could steady herself. Mu Wanqing, both anxious and angry, cursed, "You are a nun but you are not afraid of doing this kind of things!"

When Yun Zhong He first saw the pretty nun, he was delighted and thought, "Today I have been so lucky! I can kill two birds with one stone by capturing both ladies!"

However, after he saw the nun fight with the horsehair whisk and how easily she neutralised Mu Wanqing's fierce attack, he knew that the nun's martial arts was really not bad and thus, he leapt on the horse's saddle and observed silently, thinking, "Both ladies are pretty, catching any one of them would be just fine."

The nun said angrily, "Young lady, what nonsense are you talking? Who...who are you to him?"

Mu Wanqing said, "I am Husband Duan's wife. Quick, let go of him!" The nun froze, and then suddenly smiled, pulling Duan Yu's ears, she said with a laugh, "Is this true?" Duan Yu replied with a laugh, "It can be true and it can be false." The nun pinched Duan Yu's cheek hard and said with a laugh, "Didn't learn any bit of your father's martial arts, but learnt all his nonsensical romantic ways. See if I don't break your leg?" Turning her head, she studied Mu Wanqing and said, "This young lady is really quite pretty but she is too wild and needs to be disciplined."

Mu Wanqing said angrily, "What has it got to do with you whether or not I am wild?" If you do not let go of him, I am going to shoot you with my darts." The nun laughed and said, "You want to try?" Duan Yu shouted, "No, Sister Wan! Do you know who she is?" and put his arms around the nun's neck. Mu Wanqing became even angrier and with a wave of her hand, two poison darts shot towards the nun.

The nun had been all smiles, but after seeing the darts, her expression changed, and she waved her horse whisk, catching the two darts. She asked sternly, "How is 'The Sabre of Antagonism' Qin Hongmian related to you?" Mu Wanqing replied, "What 'The Sabre of Antagonism' Qin Hongmian? Never heard of her. Quick! Let go of my Husband Duan!" She had obviously seen now that it was Husband Duan who was hugging the nun, and not the nun who was hugging Husband Duan, but she still felt that it was the nun's fault.

Duan Yu, seeing that the nun was angry to the extent that her face was deathly pale, advised, "Mom, don't be angry."

"Mom, don't be angry." these few words went into Mu Wanqing's ears; she was greatly shocked and could not believe her own ears and she gasped, "What!! She...she is your mother?!"

Duan Yu said with a laugh, "Just now, I called 'Mom', didn't you hear?" and turned his head, saying to the nun, "Mom, she is Mu Wanqing Miss Mu, when I met with danger these few days and was bullied by evil people, she saved my life many times."

Suddenly, from behind the willow tree, someone shouted, "Sage of the Hollow Jade! Be careful! He is one of the Four Great Evils!" Following this, someone dashed out, it was Zhu Dan Chen. He, seeing the nun's expression on her face, thought that she had been taken advantage of by Yun Zhong He, said with a shaking voice, "You...you fought with him?"

Yun Zhong He said with a laugh, "Starting now won't be too late!" and before he finished his sentence, he had already leapt, his feet on the saddle of the horse, and it seemed as though there was a flagpole erected on the back of the horse. Suddenly, his body reached towards the front, his right foot hooking on to the saddle and at the same time, his iron fingers reached towards the nun, trying to grab her. The nun slanted her body to the left of the horse and her horsehair whisk with two darts flew out; Yun Zhong He dodged them. The nun then waved her horsehair whisk and attacked his left leg, but Yun Zhong He actually did not dodge it and instead, the iron fingers in his left hand reached and tried to grab the nun's back. The nun avoided them and fought back with her horsehair whisk. Yun Zhong He took a step forward, his foot on the horse's head, having the advantage of a commanding position overlooking the

ground below and the iron fingers in his right hand swept out.

Zhu Dan Chen yelled, "Come down!" and leapt on to the crupper, the judge's brush in his left hand attacking his waist on the left. Yun Zhong He blocked the attack with the iron fingers in this left hand, attacking short by long and counter-attacked. The Sage of the Hollow Jade waved her horsehair whisk and attacked his legs at the same time. Yun Zhong He, the iron fingers in his two hands flying, was alone fighting two and was actually losing. Mu Wanqing, seeing that he was standing high on the horse and had the advantage of not needing to defend his upper half of the body, shot out a dart and hit the horse's left eye. The horse whined and collapsed. The Sage of the Hollow Jade turned her horsehair whisk and caught the iron fingers in Yun Zhong He's right hand. Zhu Dan Chen quickly ran up and attacked continuously with three strokes. At the same time, The Sage of the Hollow Jade and Yun Zhong He were having a "tug-of-war".

Although Yun Zhong He's internal energy was much stronger, he was using half of it to block Zhu Dan Chen's judge's brush and also to defend himself against Mu Wanqing's poison darts. Thus, he felt his hand tremble and at the same time, both the horsehair whisk and iron fingers left their hands and flew up in the sky. He knew that today he could not possibly win and he cursed, "Fellows of Dali are always winning with more people!" Leaping up from the saddle, his body flying out like an arrow, the iron fingers in his left hand caught the branches of a big willow tree nearby and turning over, he was already a few metres away. Mu Wanqing shot a dart towards him and "Pa!" it landed on the willow tree. As for Yun Zhong He, he was already gone and nowhere to be seen. Following this, "Dang Qiang Qiang!" and both the horsehair whisk and iron fingers landed on the ground.

Zhu Dan Chen went on his knees and bowed respectfully to The Sage of the Hollow Jade, saying, "Dan Chen almost lost his life today, thank you for the rescue." The Sage of the Hollow Jade smiled and replied, "I haven't touched any weapons for over ten years and my skills have deprieved. Brother Zhu, what is the origin of this person?" Zhu Dan Chen replied, "I have heard that the Four Great Evils are coming together to Dali. This person is ranked as the last of the four, but his martial art skills are already so great. Thus, we can imagine how the other three are. Could you please... please evade them for a while in the prince's palace and let us deal with the Four Great Evils first?"

The expression on The Sage of the Hollow Jade's face slightly changed and she said, "Why should I still go to the Prince's Palace? If the Four Great Evils come and I cannot defeat them, I shall just die." Zhu Dan Chen did not dare to continue talking and kept winking to Duan Yu, asking him to help plead with his mother.

Duan Yu picked up the horsehair whisk and handed it to his mother and threw Yun Zhong He's iron fingers into the lake, saying, "Mother, these Four Great Evils are really vicious; since you do not wish to go home, I shall accompany you to Uncle's house instead." The Sage of the Hollow Jade shook her head, saying, "I am not going." and her eyes turned red, as though she was about to cry. Duan Yu said, "Ok, since you are not going, I will stay here to accompany you." Turning his head, he said to Zhu Dan Chen, "Fourth Brother Zhu, please inform my uncle and father that both Mother and I are combining forces to defend ourselves against the Four Great Evils."

The Sage of the Hollow Jade laughed and said, "Not ashamed of yourself? What ability do you have to combine forces with me to defend against the Four Great Evils?" Although her son had caused her to start laughing, the tears that had been in her eyes finally flowed down her cheeks; she turned back and used her sleeves to wipe her tears.

Mu Wanqing was puzzled and thought, "Why would Husband Duan's mother be a nun? Since Yun Zhong He has left, he would definitely return, combining forces with the other three Great Evils to attack; how would his mother be able to defend herself against them? Why does she simply refuse to go home to avoid them? Oh! There are many heartless men in this world; Husband Duan's father must have another woman, causing Husband Duan's mother to be angry and thus becoming a nun." Thinking about this, she felt very sympathetic towards her and said, "Sage of the Hollow Jade, I help you defend against the enemies."

The Sage of the Hollow Jade studied her closely and suddenly asked sternly, "Tell me the truth! How is 'The Sabre of Antagonism' Qin Hongmian related to you? Mu Wanqing also got angry and said, "I told you earlier, I have never heard of that name before. I don't even know whether Qin Hongmian is male or female, human or beast!"

The Sage of the Hollow Jade, hearing her say "Human or beast", immediately felt relieved as she was thinking, "If she was a descendant of Qin Hongmian, she would never use the word 'beast'." Thus, although Mu Wanqing had started arguing with her, her expression softened instead and she said with a laugh, "Please don't blame me, Miss! Just now, when I saw the technique you used when you shot the darts, I thought that it was very similar to a lady that I knew, furthermore, you bear some resemblance to her, thus leading me to think in that way. Miss Mu, may I know the names of your parents? Your kungfu is good; I believe that you are from a respectable family?" Mu Wanqing shook her head and replied, "Since young, I did not have any parents and it was my master that brought me up. I do not know the names of my parents." The Sage of the Hollow Jade said, "May I know who is your master?" Mu Wanqing replied, "My master is called 'The Guest of the Secluded Valley'" The Sage of the Hollow Jade muttered, "The Guest of the Secluded Valley? The Guest of the Secluded Valley?" and

she looked towards Zhu Dan Chen, with an inquiring expression.

Zhu Dan Chen shook his head and said, "Dan Chen has only been living in the far south, and has very little knowledge and scanty information, thus, I know very little about the heroes/heroines and elders of the central plains. I believe that this elder 'The Guest of the Secluded Valley' is some great master living in seclusion." With these few sentences, he meant that he had never heard of the title 'The Guest of the Secluded Valley'.

While they were talking, they suddenly heard the sound of hooves outside the willow forest and someone shouted, "Fourth Brother! Is Young Master alright?" Zhu Dan Chen called back, "Young Master is here and he is fine." Moments later, three horses appeared and stopped in front of the monastery. Zhu Wan Li, Gu Du Cheng and Fu Si Gui got off their horses and walked closer, falling on their knees and bowing to The Sage of the Hollow Jade.

Mu Wanqing grew up in the wilderness since young and being irritated by all the etiquette, she thought, "All these people have so high kungfu, why do they fall to their knees and bow when they see people?"

The Sage of the Hollow Jade noticed that the three of them looked rather disheveled; Fu Si Gui had a wound on his face and half his face was wrapped in a bandage, Gu Du Cheng had blood stains on his body and Zhu Wan Li's metal stick had been broken in half. She hurriedly asked, "What is it? Is the enemy very strong? How is Si Gui's injury?" Hearing her ask about it, Fu Si Gui got angry and said, "It is all Si Gui's fault for not being proficient enough and I am very ashamed of myself. I am sorry for worrying Your Highness." The Sage of the Hollow Jade said rather sadly, "Still calling me Your Highness? Please remember more correctly." Fu Si Gui lowered his head and said, "Yes, please pardon me, Your Highness." He still used "Your Highness" as he was used to it and it was difficult for him to change.

Zhu Dan Chen said, "Where is Lord Gao?" Zhu Wan Li replied, "Lord Gao was afflicted with an internal injury and it was not suitable for him to ride a sprinting horse, he will be here very soon." The Sage of the Hollow Jade let out a soft "Ah!" and said, "Even Lord Gao is injured? Is he..he okay?" Zhu Wan Li replied, "Lord Gao was fighting with Divine Croc, at the crucial moment, Second Madam Ye suddenly launched a sneak attack. Lord Gao was unable to divert his energies to fend off the attack and the blow landed on his back. The Sage of the Hollow Jade took Duan Yu's hand and said, "Let's go and look for Uncle Gao." The two of them walked out of the willow forest and Mu Wanqing followed them. Zhu Wan Li tied their horses to a willow tree and followed behind.

In the distance, a horse trotted towards them and there was a person lying on the back of the horse. The Sage of the Hollow Jade and the others walked quickly towards the horse and realised that the person was Gao Sheng Tai. Duan Yu went forward swiftly and asked, "Uncle Gao, how are you feeling?" Gao Sheng Tai replied, "Quite okay." and raised his head, seeing The Sage of the Hollow Jade. He struggled, trying to get off the horse to bow. The Sage of the Hollow Jade said, "Lord Gao, you are injured, there is no need to bow." However, Gao Sheng Tai had already got off the horse and he bowed, saying, "Gao Sheng Tai pays respects to Your Highness." The Sage of the Hollow Jade returned the greeting and said, "Yu'er, go and help Uncle Gao."

Mu Wanqing was puzzled and thought, "This person with the surname Gao has such high kungfu, using only a metal flute, he made Second Madam Ye retreat with only a few strokes. Why is he so respectful when he sees Husband Duan's mother? And he addresses her as "Your Highness". Could it be that Husband Duan...Husband Duan is some sort of prince? But this bookworm does things so weirdly, how can he be a prince?"

The Sage of the Hollow Jade, "Lord Gao, please go back to Dali to rest." Gao Sheng Tai replied, "Yes, the Four Great

Evils are coming together to Dali and the situation is really dangerous. Your Highness, please go back temporarily to the Prince's Palace." The Sage of the Hollow Jade sighed and said, "In my lifetime, I will never go back there again." Gao Sheng Tai said, "Since this is so, we shall guard Yu Xu Monastery. He turned to Fu Si Gui and said, "Si Gui, please go back and inform them immediately." Fu Si Gui replied, "Yes." and ran towards the horses tied outside Yu Xu Monastery.

The Sage of the Hollow Jade said, "Wait!" and lowered her head, thinking. Fu Si Gui immediately stopped.

Mu Wanqing noticed The Sage of the Hollow Jade's expression, showing that she was in a dilemma and could not decide what to do. The afternoon sun shone on her face, showing her radiance; although The Sage of the Hollow Jade was already middle-aged, she had not lost her beauty. Mu Wanqing thought, "Husband Duan's mother is so beautiful, just like the Goddess of Mercy in the painting."

After some time, The Sage of the Hollow Jade lifted up her head and said, "Ok, let's all go back to Dali. I am only one person, and I must not make everyone take this risk with me." Duan Yu was delighted and jumped up to hug her neck, crying, "That's my good mother!" Fu Si Gui said, "Your subordinate shall go and inform them of these news." and he ran back, untying the horse and getting onto it, sprinting towards the north. Zhu Wan Li led the horses towards them, letting The Sage of the Hollow Jade, Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing get on them.

The group of them headed towards Dali, with The Sage of the Hollow Jade, Mu Wanqing, Duan Yu and Gao Sheng Tai riding the horses, while Zhu Wan Li, Gu Du Cheng and Zhu Dan Chen went on foot. After several kilometres, they saw a troop of soldiers on horses heading towards them. Zhu Wan Li went ahead of them and said something to the troop leader. The troop leader gave a command and suddenly, all the soldiers got off their horses and fell to their knees. Duan

Yu waved and said with a laugh, "There is no need to stand on ceremony." The troop leader gave an order for three horses to be given up for Zhu Wan Li and the rest to ride. He himself led the troops to clear the way for them. The sound of many hooves could be heard as they headed towards the main path.

Mu Wanqing saw this display of power and realised that Duan Yu was no ordinary person. She got worried and thought, "I thought he was just some poor scholar wandering the country, thus, if he wanted to marry anyone, he can just marry. However, judging at that rather big show of power, he could be a relative of the emperor or some high-ranking official. What if he looks down on me, a woman from the wilderness? Master has told me that the richer a man is, the more heartless he will be, and that when he takes a wife, he must have a marriage between families of similar social rank. Heng, if he marries me properly, it shall be ok, but if he has second thoughts about it, and keeps refusing to do it, I shall cut him with my sword. I am not going to care how influential he is." Thinking about this, she could not hide it in her heart anymore and she went to Duan Yu and asked, "Who in the world are you? The agreement that we had at the summit of the mountain, does it still count?"

Duan Yu saw that there were people in front and behind their horses, yet she suddenly asked directly about their marriage; he couldn't help feeling embarrassed and said with a laugh, "When we are in Dali City, I shall tell you slowly about it. Mu Wanqing replied, "If you dare to let...let me...me...down..." after repeating these words, she could not continue and broke off. Duan Yu realised how flushed her face was and saw the tears in her eyes, making her even more beautiful, making his love for her grow and he said softly to her, "I couldn't hope for more. Don't worry, my mother likes you too."

Translated by Pacifian

Mu Wan Qing's teary face broke into one of laughter, and in a soft voice, she said, "Whether or not your mom likes me ... why should I care?"

The underlying meaning of this, of course, was that "so long as you like me, that would be all that matters".

Duan Yu's heart shook for an instant; at the corner of his eye, he could see his mother staring at the pair of them, wearing an expression that seemed like a smile. He could not help feeling deeply embarrassed.

By then it was the *shen* hours of the day [shen = 3pm to 5pm], and they were approximately twenty to thirty *li* from the city of DaLi. Ahead, as clouds of dust swirled about in frenzy, what seemed like a thousand soldiers on horses rode towards them in rows. Two flags, apricot-yellow in colour, fanned out along with the wind. Two huge words in red which read "Zhen Nan" were written on one of the flags, while the other one had the words "Bao Guo" in black.

[Zhen Nan: Military Guardian of The South; Bao Guo: Protector of the Country]

"Mom," Duan Yu called out, "Dad's personally came to fetch you."

The Sage of the Hollow Jade replied with a 'hng' sound and brought the horse to a halt. Gao Sheng Tai and the others got down their horses together to make way. Duan Yu rode his horse forward; Mu Wan Qing hesitated slightly, before following suit.

Soon the distance between both parties closed in. Duan Yu yelled, "Dad, Mom's back."

The two flag-carriers made way to the sides, and a man wearing purple robes rode straight towards them on a large white horse. "Yu'er," The man roared, "You're sure extremely mischievous. You've caused your Uncle Gao to get into such serious injuries. See if I don't break both your legs."

Startled, Mu Wan Qing thought: [i]Hng! You want to break Duan'lang's legs ... even if you're his father, no way should you do that."

The man in purple had such a rectangular face it looked like the Chinese character 'guo' [國]. With thick brows and large eyes, he wore a fierce and domineering facial expression, not without carrying an air of a king. Seeing his son has come home without any harm, he looked three-tenths furious, and the other seven-tenths relieved.

"How fortunate Duan'lang looks so much like his mother and not like you. Had he been as fierce-looking as you, I would definitely not like it," thought Mu Wan Qing.

Duan Yu rode forward, laughing, "Dad, shall you be healthy always."

Feigning anger, the man in purple robes said, "Healthy ... what? At least I'm not angered to death with you."

Translated by Ren Wo Xing

Duan Yu laughingly replied, "If it weren't for me heading out this time, how could I have brought mother back? I think I really have performed an awe-inspiring act of great merit. So let's just consider myself as having redeemed myself. Father, don't be angry." The man in purple robes, upon hearing this response, answered, "Even if I don't beat you up, your uncle will not let you off lightly!" Applying pressure to his horse's sides, the white horse suddenly flew towards the direction of the Sage of the Hollow Jade.

Mu Wanqing saw that the squadron of cavalry was clothed in fine brocade, wearing shining helmets, and their weapons glimmering in the light. Twenty people in front held aloft a banner, upon which was written six words: "DaLi's 'South-Subduing Prince Duan'". On the side of the tiger-headed banner were the words, "Great General Duan, Protector of the Country". Even though she was a person who feared neither heaven nor earth, upon seeing this majestic, awe-inspiring show, she couldn't help but feel great respect. Turning to Duan Yu, she asked, "Hey, this 'South-Subduing Prince', 'Great General Who Protects the Country', is your dad, right?"

Laughing, Duan Yu nodded his head. In a low voice, he responded, "Yes, that would be your father-in-law."

Mu Wanning reined in her horse in a daze. All of a sudden, her heart was filled with confusion. She was stupefied for a long period of time, before finally spurring her horse to gallop forward to Duan Yu's side. On the main street, there were people everywhere. Suddenly, in her heart, she was feeling an inexpressible solitude, making her want to stay close to Duan Yu. Only then did she calm down a little.

The South-Subduing Prince slowed his horse down roughly ten feet away from the Sage of the Hollow Jade. The two exchanged glances for some time; I look at you, you stare at me. Neither of them opened their mouths. Duan Yu spoke. "Mother, dad personally came to receive you and escort you home." The Sage of the Hollow Jade replied, "Go tell your aunt that I'm back. I'll stay with her for a few days. After we've beaten off our enemies, I'll return to the Hollow Jade Monastery."

The South-Subduing Prince laughed. "Wife, you're still angry at me? Let's go home. Afterwards, I'll slowly make everything up to you." The Sage of the Hollow Jade's face was unmoved. "I'm not going home. I'm entering the palace."

Duan Yu said, "That works too. Let's all enter the palace first and pay a visit to uncle and auntie. Mother, this time your son snuck outside to have some fun, and uncle definitely is going to be furious. Dad probably isn't going to speak up on my behalf, this time. It'll have to be you who begs for clemency on my behalf." The Sage of Hollow Jade responded, "The older you grow, the less responsible you get. It is going to be necessary to allow your uncle to thrash you and teach you a lesson."

Duan Yu laughingly responded, "The blows may fall on the son's body, but the pain will occur in the mother's heart. It's best if I don't get beaten!" The Sage of Hollow Jade let

out a small laugh. "Hah! The harder you get beaten, the better. I have no sympathy for you at all!"

Initially, there was an aura of awkwardness between the South-Subduing Prince and the Sage of Hollow Jade. But with Duan Yu cracking jokes and being so light-hearted, he managed to get a laugh out of the Sage of Hollow Jade, breaking the icy tone of the meeting. Duan Yu said, "Dad! You have a good horse. Why aren't you letting mother ride it?" The Sage of Hollow Jade replied, "I refuse!" With a kick, she spurred her horse to gallop forwards and away from them.

Duan Yu spurred his own horse onwards as well, overtaking her and grabbing the reins of his mother's horse. The South-Subduing Prince had already dismounted and walked it over towards them. Giggling, Duan Yu hugged his mother and placed her on the saddle of his father's horse.

With a laugh, Duan Yu said, "Mother, a peerless, unequalled beauty such as yourself, riding this white horse, becomes even more attractive. You are like the Bodhisattva Guanyin herself, having descended upon the mortal world!" Laughing, the Sage of Hollow Jade replied, "That girl of yours surnamed 'Mu' is the real peerless beauty without equal. You're just making fun of your mother, this old lady."

The South-Subduing Prince turned to look at Mu Wanqing. Duan Yu said, "She...she is Miss Mu. She is your son's...your son's...your son's good friend." The South-Subduing Prince saw the expression on his son's face and immediately understood his real meaning. He saw that Mu Wanqing had a clear, pure complexion and was very beautiful, and secretly cheered. "Yu'er, you have pretty good eyesight!" He saw Mu Wanqing's gaze was cloudy and distant, and she did not come forward to pay her respects. He thought to himself, "So she's a girl from the countryside who doesn't understand propriety."

His heart still filled with anxiety over the state of Gao Shengtai's injuries, he quickly strode over to the latter's

side. "Younger brother Tai, how are your internal injuries?" He stretched out his finger to touch Gao Shengtai's wrist, feeling for his pulse. Gao Shengtai replied, "My 'du ' meridian received some injuries, but it's no big deal. You...there is no need for you to waste your energy."

Before he even finished speaking, the South-Subduing Prince had already extended the forefinger of his right hand and struck three times at the back of his neck, then pressed on his waist with his free hand.

From the top of the South-Subduing Prince's head arose thin wisps of white smoke. It wasn't until the amount of time it would take to drink a cup of tea had passed before he would release his hold. Gao Shengtai said, "Elder brother Chun, with powerful enemies so close by, how can you pick this time to waste your internal energy on me?" The South-Subduing Prince laughed. "Your internal injuries are not light. The sooner we start to heal you, the sooner you'll get better. After I take you to see our elder brother, he won't let me help you, and would involve himself instead."

Mu Wanqing saw that originally, Gao Shengtai's face was terrifyingly white. But in such a short time, color began to appear in his cheeks. In her heart, she wondered, "So husband Duan's father's internal energy has reached an extremely profound level. Why is that that husband Duan...husband Duan doesn't know any martial arts at all?"

Chu Wanli came over with a horse, and helped the South-Subduing Prince mount. The South-Subduing Prince and Gao Shengtai moved slowly, as the former inquired in a quiet voice regarding the enemy's status. Duan Yu talked and laughed with his mother. Under the iron-clad guardsmen's protection, they galloped towards the city of Dali. With everyone else occupied, it was unavoidable that Mu Wanqing was neglected.

At dusk, the party entered the city of Dali via the southern gate. Wherever the two flags "South-Subduing" and "Protecting Country" went, the common people would

loudly cheer, "May the South-Subduing Prince live a thousand years! May the great general live a thousand years!" The South-Subduing Prince waved to the people in response.

Mu Wanqing saw the teeming masses of people in Dali. The streets were newly paved and flat, and the marketplace was bustling. After crossing a number of intersections, they arrived at a large stone path, at the end of which was a towering palace, covered in an uncountable number of golden tiles. The sun shone off the gleaming tiles, a beautiful sight, causing one to become dazzled.

Upon reaching a memorial arch, the entire party dismounted. Mu Wanqing saw that on the memorial arch was written four large words in gold. "Saintly Road, Broad Compassion". She thought to herself, "We must have arrived at the imperial palace of Dali. Husband Duan's uncle lives in the middle of the Imperial Palace. He must be a very high official. Most likely, he's also another prince, or general, or something like that."

Passing by the memorial arch, Mu Wanqing saw an inscribed board with the words, "Palace of Saintly Compassion", written in gold. A court eunuch quickly appeared and said, "Prince, I must report that the Emperor and the Empress are awaiting you at your home. Will the lord prince and the imperial concubine please return to the South-Subduing Palace and appear before his majesty."

The South-Subduing Prince replied, "Understood." Duan Yu laughed. "Marvelous, marvelous!" The Sage of Hollow Jade glanced at him, angrily asking, "What's so marvelous? I'll just wait at the imperial palace for the Empress to return!" But the eunuch replied, "The Empress instructed me to request that the imperial concubine immediately visit her, as she has urgent matters to discuss." The Sage of Hollow Jade muttered in a low voice, "What type of urgent matter does she want to discuss? She's full of devilish schemes."

Duan Yu knew that the Empress had planned this all out. She had anticipated that Duan Yu's mother would be unwilling to return to her own manor, and the Empress went to the South-Subduing Prince Palace herself to wait for her, with the warm intention of reconciling Duan Yu's parents. Duan Yu was extremely pleased.

After exiting, the party remounted and headed eastwards. After traveling for two li, they arrived in front of a large mansion. Two large flags fluttered in front of the gate. On each flag was written respectively the words "South-Subduing" and "Protecting Country". At the top of the gate were the words, "South-Subduing Palace". In front of the gate was a large number of imperial guards. They immediately came to attention and saluted. "We respectfully welcome the Prince and the imperial concubine back to their palace."

The South-Subduing Prince was the first to enter. After taking only one step, the Sage of Hollow Jade suddenly came to a halt. Her eyes suddenly reddening, tears began to fall. Half pushing, half tugging, Duan Yu escorted his mother through the gate. He said, "Father, your son has brought mother home! This is a deed of great merit. What award do you have for me?" His heart filled with happiness, the South-Subduing Prince replied, "Ask your mother for a reward! Whatever your mother wishes to reward you with, I will comply!" The Sage of Hollow Jade smiled between her tears. "I'll reward you with a good caning!" Duan Yu stuck out his tongue.

Upon reaching the great hall, Gao Shengtai rose to his feet. The South-Subduing Prince said, "Younger brother Tai, you are injured. Please, sit down." Duan Yu said to Mu Wanqing, "Rest here for a bit. After I pay my respects to the Emperor and the Empress, I'll come keep you company."

Mu Wanqing was unwilling to let him leave her, but had no way to stop him. All she could do was nod her head unhappily. She took a seat at the head chair. Everyone else

remained standing. It wasn't until after the South-Subduing Prince and his wife had entered the inner hall that Gao Shengtai finally sat down. But Chu Wanli, Gu Ducheng, Zhu Danchen, and the rest all remained on their feet.

Mu Wanqing paid them no attention, her eyes focused on that great hall. She saw a large horizontal plaque upon which were written the four words, "Pillar Which Supports the Nation". It was signed by the "Imperial Pen of Dingmao". The pillar was covered with calligraphy. It would be difficult to read it all in a short time, and some of the characters, she didn't even recognize.

A servant brought green tea, respectfully offering it to her on a plate. Mu Wanqing thought to herself, "These people really are weird." She saw that only herself and Gao Shengtai had been offered tea. Zhu Danchen and the others, when fighting off the enemy, had been awe-inspiring figures, but upon reaching the South-Subduing Palace, became so quietly respectful. They didn't even dare breathe too loudly, much less have the aura of heroes who were highly skilled in martial arts.

After waiting for some time, Mu Wanqing became impatient. She loudly shouted, "Duan Yu! Duan Yu! What are you doing in there? Why haven't you come out yet?"

The great hall was filled with people, but none of them had dared make so much as a peep. With Mu Wanqing's sudden shout, everyone was startled for a moment. Gao Shengtai laughingly whispered, "Miss, be patient. The young prince will be back soon." Mu Wanqing asked, "Young prince? What young prince?" Gao Shengtai responded, "Young master Duan is the son of the South-Subduing Prince. Of course he is the young prince." Mu Wanqing mused aloud to herself. "Young prince...young prince. That bookworm is a prince? He doesn't look the part!"

A eunuch exited the inner hall. "The Emperor has issued a request. Will the Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment and Mu Wanqing please enter the hall." Upon seeing the eunuch

enter, Gao Shengtai had already respectfully risen to his feet. Mu Wanqing remained seated. Upon hearing the eunuch utter her name, she wasn't happy. She muttered to herself, "He doesn't even address me as 'Miss'. Is my name so casually called out by the likes of you?" Gao Shengtai said, "Miss Mu, let us go pay our respects to the Emperor."

Even though Mu Wanqing feared neither heaven nor earth, upon hearing that she was to go meet the Emperor, she was still a bit uneasy at heart. All she could do was follow behind Gao Shengtai. They passed through a long corridor and a large courtyard. It was as though they were walking through an unending room. But at last, they arrived outside a flower pavilion.

The eunuch reported, "The Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment and Mu Wanqing have come to pay their respects to the Emperor and Empress." Then he left.

Gao Shengtai gave Mu Wanqing a meaningful look, then entered the flower pavilion and knelt before a man and a woman who were sitting in the center.

Mu Wanqing did not kneel. Seeing that the male had a long beard and wore a golden robe, with a clear and intelligent appearance, she asked, "So you are the Emperor?"

The man who sat in the middle was indeed the Emperor of the country of Dali, Duan Zhengming. His imperial reign name was "Baoding". The country of Dali was established in the second year of Heavenly Fortune, of the Later Jin dynasty of the Five Dynasties period. Thus, it was actually founded twenty three years before Zhao Kuangyin founded the Song Dynasty.

The people of Dali's Duan dynasty was originally from the Wuwei region. Their first ancestor was Duan Jianwei. He assisted the Nanzhao's Meng clan and became known as the "Official of Purenness and Peace." Six generations later, his descendant Duan Siping became the governor of Tonghai. In the 'Dingyou' year, Duan Siping founded the nation, and

became the Great Ancestor of the Duan dynasty, known as the 'Saintly Emperor of Martial Prowess and Learning'. Duan Zhengming was the fourteenth Emperor in the line, which had been in power for a hundred and fifty years.

At this time, the Northern Song was ruled by Emperor Zhezong in the city of Bianliang [now known as Kaifeng]. Being young in years, the Empress Dowager attended to state affairs. She appointed and trusted famous statesmen and repealed severe laws, resulting in the rejoicing of the common people and pacifying the land. She was the most brilliant and humane female lord in Chinese history, which would proclaim her as being the 'female Yao and Shun' [famously benevolent Chinese emperors].

The country of Dali was located in southern Xinjiang, and thus every Emperor was a devout adherent to Buddhism. Even though they had raised themselves to the level of being a ruler, towards the Song dynasty, they were always deferential and unfailingly patient, never raising arms against them. Emperor Baoding had reigned for eleven years and espoused three precepts. To protect order, to uphold peace, and secure the blessings of heaven, creating a heaven-like place to live. The borders were safe, the country was prosperous, and the people lived in peace.

Emperor Baoding, upon seeing that Mu Wanqing not only did not kneel, but even cheekily asked him directly if he was the Emperor, couldn't help but laugh. "I am indeed the Emperor. Do you find the city of Dali to be a fun place?" Mu Wanqing replied, "As soon as I entered the city, I was brought to come see you. I haven't explored it yet." Emperor Baoding let out a slight smile. "Tomorrow, Yu'er will take you out to tour the city and show you the sights of Dali." Mu Wanqing replied, "Great. Will you be coming with us as well?" After she said this, everybody present couldn't help but laugh slightly.

Emperor Baoding turned to look at the Empress who sat by his side and merrily asked, "Empress, this little sister

wants us to accompany her sightseeing. What do you think?" The Empress smiled a little, but did not respond. Mu Wanqing cast a few glances at her. "Are you the Empress? You really are quite pretty." Emperor Baoding roared with laughter. "Yu'er, this Miss Mu is very innocent and naive. How amusing!"

Mu Wanqing asked, "Why do you called him "Yu'er" [child Yu]? Are you the 'uncle' which he kept on talking about? He snuck out of the city to have some fun, and was very afraid that you would be angry at him. Don't beat him, okay?" Emperor Baoding laughed. "I was going to give him fifty hard strokes of the cane, but since you ask for mercy on his behalf, I'll spare him. Yu'er, quickly thank Miss Mu!"

Seeing that Mu Wanqing had put the Emperor in a merry mood, Duan Yu was happy. He knew that his uncle had an even temperament. Duan Yu bowed deeply towards Mu Wanqing, and said, "Many thanks to Miss Mu for asking for clemency on my behalf!" Mu Wanqing returned his bow and whispered, "As long as your uncle has agreed to not beat you, my heart is at ease. There's no need to thank me." Then she immediately turned towards Emperor Baoding and said, "I always thought that Emperors were really fierce and scary people. I never would have imagined that you...you...you are very nice."

Aside from being praised by his parents when he was a child, for the past ten years, everyone who met Emperor Baoding would be extremely respectful and fearful. Nobody would ever call him "very nice". But he saw that Mu Wanqing was like a piece of muddied gold or uncut jade, totally unaware of propriety and custom, and liked her all the more. He said to the Empress, "Do you have anything to bestow upon her?"

The Empress removed a jade bracelet from her left wrist and handed it over. "I'll give this to you as a gift."

Mu Wanqing accepted the gift and wore it on her own wrist. Suddenly, she laughed. "Thanks! Next time, I'll also

find something pretty and give it to you!" The Empress laughed slightly. "Then I'll thank you in advance."

Suddenly, a 'ge' sound could be heard on the roof of the pavilion, followed by another 'ge' sound coming from the top of an adjacent room.

Mu Wanqing was startled and knew that an enemy had arrived. That person had arrived so very quickly. But suddenly, like raindrops hitting the ground, the sound of other people arriving on the roof was heard as well. Chu Wanli's voice sounded out, "Sir, what desire do you have that causes you to arrive at the prince's manor in the dead of night?"

A loud, coarse, husky voice replied, "I came to find my apprentice! Quick, go have my obedient apprentice come out and pay me a visit!" It was the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas.

Mu Wanqing's sense of startlement deepened. Although the prince's palace was heavily protected, with guards clustered as thickly as the clouds, and although the South-Subduing Prince, Gao Shengtai, the Sage of Hollow Jade, and Chu, Gu, Fu, and Zhu all possessed excellent martial arts, but the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas really was too formidable. If Yun Zhong'e and Ye Erniang, along with that as-yet unseen 'most evil man in the world' appeared, then the Four Evils would be working in harmony, and it would be difficult to prevent them from kidnapping Duan Yu.

Chu Wanli shouted in reply, "Sir, who is your apprentice? How could your apprentice be in the palace of the South-Subduing Prince? Withdraw and depart!" But suddenly, a mocking laugh was heard, and a large hand appeared which ripped apart the large plaque above the room, tearing it in two. Like a shadowy blur, the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas suddenly appeared in the middle of the pavilion.

Casting his gaze across the people present, he spotted Duan Yu and laughed loudly, then shouted, "Number four

wasn't wrong! My obedient apprentice really is here after all! Quick, beg for me to make you my apprentice, then come with me to learn martial arts!" While speaking, he extended his chicken-claw like hands and reached for Duan Yu's shoulders.

The South-Subduing Prince saw that this claw came swiftly and with great power, and was afraid that his beloved son would be hurt. Immediately, he struck out with a counter-palm. With a 'peng' sound, their two hands collided and he fully blocked the energy of the strike. The Divine Crocodile was secretly alarmed and asked, "Who the heck are you? I came here to take my apprentice away, what business is it of yours?" Smiling, the South-Subduing Prince replied, "I am Duan Zhengchun. This child is my son. When, precisely, did he kowtow and accept you as his master?"

Duan Yu laughed. "He wanted to accept me as his apprentice. I told him that I had accepted another master long ago, but he wouldn't believe me."

The Divine Crocodile looked at Duan Yu, then looked at the South-Subduing Prince, Duan Zhengchun, and said, "The old guy's martial arts is pretty damn good, but the kid doesn't know any at all. I refuse to believe you two are father and son! Duan Zhengchun, we're not bad, but even if he really is your son, you haven't been teaching martial arts properly. Your son really is worthless! What a pity! What a pity!"

Duan Zhengchun responded, "What's a pity?" The Divine Crocodile responded, "Your son is really similar to me. He's an exceptionally rare prospect for studying martial arts. He only needs to study with me for ten years, and I guarantee that he will become an incredible expert in the wulin."

Duan Zhengchun was half-furious, half-amused. From his earlier exchange of palms with the Divine Crocodile, he knew that this person's martial arts was extremely formidable, and just as he was formulating a proper response, Duan Yu interjected.

“Yue Number Three! Your martial arts are crap. You aren’t fit to be my master! Go back to the “Ten Thousand Crocodile Island” of the Southern Seas and practice martial arts for another twenty years before coming here to discuss martial arts with others!” The Divine Crocodile angrily responded, “A little brat like you, do you have the stature to claim my martial arts are bad?!”

Duan Yu responded, “Let me ask you. ‘Wind and thunder, increase. A gentleman should act in virtuous ways, and if he commits an error, must rectify it.’ What does this mean?” The Divine Crocodile was stupefied, then indignantly responded, “That doesn’t have any meaning. You’re just talking rubbish!”

Duan Yu said, “You don’t even understand these most basic of sentences, how can you be fit to discuss martial arts philosophy? I’ll ask you another question. ‘To injure those above, to benefit those below, the people speak without boundaries. Ones self, top and bottom, below. Arriving at great brightness’. What does that mean?”

Emperor Baoding, the South-Subduing Prince, Gao Shengtai, and others, upon hearing him recite from the Book of Changes [I-Ching] to tease this person, couldn’t control their laughter. Even though Mu Wanqing had no idea what he was talking about, but guessed that it was something akin to ‘a sour scholar dropping a satchel’, and that he was mocking the Divine Crocodile.

In his startlement, the Divine Crocodile noticed that upon the face of every person present was suppressed laughter. He guessed that whatever it was that Duan Yu said, it probably was insulting. With a loud roar, he extended his palm, preparing to strike. Duan Zhengchun took a half-step forward, standing between him and his son.

Duan Yu laughed. “What I have said are all secrets of martial arts practice, and their subtleties are boundless and without end. You probably wouldn’t understand anyways. You ‘frog in a well’ [reference to a Chinese parable], actually

want to be my master? The people under heaven would laugh so hard, their mouths would become permanently askew! Haha! The masters I have kowtowed to, some are Daoist immortals from jade caverns, others are elite scholars and erudites, and still others are learned elder monks. You? Even if you studied for another ten years, you might not be able to get me to accept you as my student!"

The Divine Crocodile loudly roared, "Who is the teacher you have accepted? Tell him to get out here and show me his abilities!"

Duan Zhengchun saw that only one of the Four Evils had arrived. Although his martial arts was formidable, the Divine Crocodile was still a level beneath himself. He might as well take the opportunity to allow this idiot to be teased a bit. Thus, although the Emperor, Empress, and imperial concubine were all in attendance, he did not step in to curb his son's nonsense.

Duan Yu, seeing amusement on the face of his uncle and seeing that his father wasn't going to step in, became even more animated. He said to the Divine Crocodile, "Fine. You have the courage to stay here. I'll go invite my master. Don't get scared and hop away!" The Divine Crocodile angrily replied, "I, Yue Number Two, have wandered the jianghu for such a long time. Who am I afraid of? Hurry, go!" Turning, Duan Yu left.

The Divine Crocodile took a look at every person's face, only to see that there was a smile on each of their faces. He thought to himself, "My apprentice's martial arts are so crappy, not worth a dog's fart. How good can his teacher be? Your old man aint scared of him one bit!"

He suddenly heard the sound of boots as two people entered the room. From outside, Duan Yu called out, "Has that Yue Number Three fellow ran off yet? Father, don't let him flee! My master is coming." The Divine Crocodile roared back, "Why would I run away? Damn it! Quickly, have your teacher enter! You aren't willing to accept such an illustrious

teacher as myself, it's most likely because your current teacher won't agree. First I'll snap the neck of your worthless teacher. Then, without a teacher, you'll have to accept me as your teacher! Haha, this idea of mine is so extremely brilliant!"

Just as he was praising himself, Duan Yu brought a person in. Upon seeing that person, everyone present couldn't resist laughing their heads off.

This person wore a small hat and a long gown, with a yellow, rat-like mustache, and squinty red eyes. He had a shrunken set of shoulders, appearing to be a humble thing. The Sage of Hollow Jade and the others recognized him as Mr. Huo, one of the palace's accountants. This person always seemed to be half-asleep, half-awake. He loved to go gambling with the palace's servants.

At the moment, he was covered with the scent of alcohol and his front was covered in grease. Duan Yu was grabbing his arm, trying to pull him in, but he was cowering and reluctant. As soon as he entered the flower pavilion, he knelt before the Emperor and the Empress. Emperor Baoding did not recognize him, and merely said, "Forget it."

Holding onto Mr. Huo's arm, Duan Yu said to the Divine Crocodile, "Yue Number Three, amongst all of my masters, this one has the most shallow martial arts. First you need to overcome him, before you can go on to challenge my other masters." The Divine Crocodile screamed loudly, "If I can't crush him to a pulp within three stances, I'll accept you as my master!"

Duan Yu's eyes suddenly gleamed. "Are you serious? A man's word is his bond. If a man breaks his word, then he isn't a man at all. He's a bastard son of a turtle!" The Divine Crocodile yelled, "Come, come, come!" Duan Yu answered, "If we're only competing three stances, then there's no need to fight with my master. I'll take on those three stances of yours myself."

After hearing the report from Yun Zhonghe, the Divine Crocodile immediately rushed to Dali. His sole goal was to abduct Duan Yu and make him the heir of the martial arts of the Southern Seas sect. After exchanging a set of palms with Duan Zhengchun, his heart was filled with fear, thinking to himself that to kidnap Duan Yu while surrounded by so many elite fighters would be a difficult task indeed. He might not even be able to take his apprentice's father.

Fortunately, at this moment, Duan Yu himself volunteered to fight him. He couldn't ask for a better opportunity. With a single stance, he could subdue Duan Yu. After that, no matter how good Duan Zhengchun and the other's martial arts were, they wouldn't dare move against him. All they would be able to do would be to watch dumbly as he took his apprentice away. The Divine Crocodile replied, "Fine, come take three stances from me. I won't use any internal energy and promise not to hurt you at all."

Duan Yu answered, "Let's set all the conditions now. What happens if you can't beat me in those three stances?"

The Divine Crocodile laughed loudly. He knew that Duan Yu was a frail, scholarly weakling who didn't even have the strength to tie up a chicken. Forget three stances, the kid couldn't even take on one. "If I can't hit you in three stances, I'll accept you as my master." Duan Yu laughed. "Everyone here can bear witness. You won't go back on your words, will you?" The Divine Crocodile angrily replied, "The words of Yue Number Two are totally trustworthy! If I say this is this, then it is. If I say that is that, then it is."

Duan Yu teased, "Yue Number Three!" The Divine Crocodile retorted, "Yue Number Two!" Duan Yu again said, "Yue Number Three!" The Divine Crocodile said, "Quick, make your move and stop wasting time!" Duan Yu strode forward two steps to face the Divine Crocodile.

Of the people in the palace, everyone from the Emperor and Empress on down, with the exception of Mu Wanqing, had watched Duan Yu grow up. They all knew that he loved

scholastics and hated fighting. This time, Emperor Baoding and Duan Zhengchun wanted to force him to learn martial arts. Instead, he actually snuck away from home. Forget about exchanging blows with first class masters, even if he were to fight with your average bodyguard or escort, he would definitely not be a match.

Everyone present knew that he was just teasing this idiot, but in the end, his words became hard, and it looked like he was actually going to fight the idiot. Although the Divine Crocodile had promised not to harm him due to wanting to take him on as an apprentice, the Divine Crocodile's temperament was violent and murderous. What if he suddenly became enraged and started to fight for real? Duan Yu was of royal descent, how could he possibly be allowed to take on the risk? The Sage of Hollow Jade was the first to speak and to block Duan Yu. "Yu'er, stop fooling around. There's no need to waste time on a wild, uncouth man such as him." The Empress also spoke. "Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment, issue an order to have this madman apprehended."

The Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment, Gao Shengtai, replied, "Your servant, Gao Shengtai, will obey." Turning, he shouted, "Chu Wanli, Gu Ducheng, Fu Sigui, Zhu Danchen! The four of you, listen to the imperial decree! The Empress orders you to apprehend this unruly man!" Chu Wanli and the other three respectfully replied, "Your servants shall follow the decree."

The Divine Crocodile, seeing that a brawl was about to erupt, loudly shouted, "So you people want to mob me, huh? Fine! All of you, come at once! You there! Are you the Emperor and the Empress? Why don't the two of you come as well?"

Duan Yu frantically waved his hands. "Wait, wait! Let me fight with him for three stances first!"

Emperor Baoding knew that this nephew of his was often capable of exceeding expectations. Perhaps he had some

sort of plan or trick up his sleeve. The Divine Crocodile definitely would not take his life, and with himself, the Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment, his brothers, and others present, there definitely wouldn't be any problems. "Everybody, stop. We might as well let this uncouth madman experience the martial talents of the young prince of Dali."

Chu Wanli and the other three were just about to charge, but as soon as they heard the Emperor's decree, they immediately stood down.

Duan Yu repeated, "Yue Number Three, we have to agree in advance. If you can't beat me in three stances, you'll have to take me on as your master. Even if I become your master, you need to be aware that your intelligence is lacking. There's no way I can teach you martial arts. Do you agree to this?" The Divine Crocodile angrily replied, "Who wants you to teach me martial arts? What type of crappy martial arts can you possibly know?"

Duan Yu said, "Good! So you've agreed. After I become your master, you'll have to obey my commands. If I tell you to do something, you must do it. Otherwise, you'll be known as an unfilial person who disobeys his master and insults his ancestors, which is totally contrary to the rules of the wulin. Do you agree?" The Divine Crocodile actually wasn't angry; instead, he laughed. "Naturally. After you lose and take me on as your master, you also would have to obey me."

Duan Yu had been silently pondering ten or so steps of the "Graceful Steps Upon the Waves" [Ling Bo Wei Bu] martial arts he had learned. He felt that to avoid three stances would not be difficult. However, he had never fought with anyone before, and the Divine Crocodile's martial arts was extremely high, leaving him without absolute confidence in victory. It'd be best to leave himself an avenue of retreat.

"Fine," Duan Yu said. "But if you want to take me on as your apprentice, you still need to defeat my masters one by

one. Only after proving that your martial arts are superior will I accept you as my master.” He thought to himself, “If I am grabbed by him underneath three stances, I’ll just point at all the elite martial artists here one by one and describe them all as being my masters, and force him to fight them one by one by one.” The Divine Crocodile replied, “Fine! Fine! You keep on talking but you refuse to fight. You aren’t like me at all! The students of the Southern Seas sect are never hesitant when it comes to a battle!”

Duan Yu pointed behind the Divine Crocodile with a faint smile. “One of my masters has been standing behind you for a long time, now.” The Divine Crocodile hadn’t sensed anyone behind him. Swiveling his head, he didn’t see anybody. At this time, Duan Yu suddenly advanced one step, moving as though he were floating on the breeze. Clumsily, he reached out towards the Divine Crocodile’s chest, attempting to strike at his Shanzhong acupoint with his thumb. This was an extremely clumsy and ungainly move, but Duan Yu’s body was filled with the internal energy of seven disciples of the Wuliang sword sect. Although he couldn’t use all of that internal energy, the power of this claw was not small.

The Divine Crocodile felt some pain at the pit his stomach as Duan Yu suddenly seized his Shenque acupoint, located at his navel, with his left hand. The scroll for the “Divine Art of the Northern Darkness” [Beiming Shengong] included drawings of numerous myriads of acupoints on it. Duan Yu, however, had only mastered the acupoints on two of the drawings. The “Ren” meridians, and the “Lunar Lung” scripture. The Shanzhong acupoint and Shenque acupoints were two major acupoints of the “Ren” meridians.

Startled, the Divine Crocodile immediately exerted his internal energy to resist. To his great shock, he felt it flow outwards from his Shanzhong acupoint, causing him to feel as though his entire body had lost half of its strength, frightening him even further. Duan Yu had already flipped

him around, causing his feet to point upwards and his head to point downwards. With a 'teng' sound, his big bald head collided with the floor. Fortunately for him, the floor of the flower pavilion was carpeted, and so he was not injured. In his great anger, he exercised the skill "The Carp Stands Erect" and rose to his feet, then sent out his left hand in a claw attack towards Duan Yu.

Upon seeing this series of events, every person present was extremely shocked. Duan Zhengchun, seeing that the Divine Crocodile sent out that claw with extreme force, was just about to intervene when Duan Yu suddenly sidestepped towards the left. His footwork was strange to the extreme. With but a single step, he managed to dodge the opponent's attack, which had struck with the speed of a peal of thunder or a flash of lightning. Duan Zhengchun exclaimed, "Incredible!" The Divine Crocodile's second palm attack came slamming down towards Duan Yu, who did not try to block or counter. Instead, he took two oblique steps and once again completely dodged the attack.

The Divine Crocodile had missed two attacks in a row. He was both startled and angry. Duan Yu was standing right in front of him, not more than a meter away. Suddenly, with a crazy howl, he sent out a two-handed attack, grabbing at Duan Yu's chest and stomach. He used all of his energy in this attack; arms, hands, and his claws. In his anger, he had completely forgotten that if this double blow connected, his "future heir to the Southern Seas sect" would suffer tremendous physical damage.

Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun, the Sage of Hollow Jade, and Gao Shengtai shouted in unison, "Careful!" Only to see Duan Yu take a step to the left, then a step to the right. With breeze-like ease, he had already managed to somehow appear behind the Divine Crocodile. With his two hands, he patted the Divine Crocodile on his bald head.

The Divine Crocodile felt that his opponent's attack was totally mysterious and unpredictable. Somehow, the kid had

managed to pat him on the top of his head! He darkly exclaimed, "My life comes to an end!" But as soon as his opponent touched the top of his head, he realized that there was no power behind this blow at all. With a sneer, he reversed his left hand and sent it upwards. Suddenly, five bloody lines appeared on the back of Duan Yu's hand. Duan Yu hastily retracted his hand, but the Divine Crocodile's power hadn't diminished yet. The clawing attack slid down from Duan Yu's retracted hand, resulting in five bloody cuts also being made on the Divine Crocodile's head.

Actually, after having avoided three separate attacks in a row, Duan Yu had already won this battle. Only, he was far too mischievous, and so patted the Divine Crocodile on his head. He wasn't aware that his internal energy was now quite strong, and also didn't know how to utilize it either. Consequently, he was almost captured instead. With a series of interconnected steps, he flew backwards and hid behind his father, so terrified that his face was pale and bloodless.

The Sage of Hollow Jade cast him a glance and thought to herself, "Hmph. Your father and your uncle taught you such a marvelous skill, and you've been hiding it from me all along."

Mu Wanqing said loudly, "Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas! Not only were you unable to hit him within three strokes, but you took a nasty tumble yourself instead! Quick, get over here and pay respects to your master!" Red-faced, the Divine Crocodile scratched his ear. "He wasn't fighting with me for real. This one doesn't count." Mu Wanqing pointed directly at his face. "Have you no shame? If you aren't going to accept him as your master, then you must be a bastard son of a turtle! What's your choice? Are you going to accept him as your master, or be a bastard son of a turtle?" The Divine Crocodile angrily replied, "Neither! I want to fight him again!"

Duan Zhengchun saw that his son's footwork was miraculous to the extreme, but was unable to discern the

secret behind it. Quietly, he whispered to his son, "Don't fight with him head on. Just take an opportunity to seize his acupoints." Duan Yu whispered back, "Your son is afraid now. I don't know if I can do it." Duan Zhengchun replied softly, "Don't be afraid. I'll secretly assist you from the side."

With his father supporting him, Duan Yu's courage arose, and he reappeared from behind Duan Zhengchun's back. "You weren't able to hit me in three stances. Time to accept me as your master!" The Divine Crocodile let out a thunderous bellow, then struck out at him with a powerful palm.

Duan Yu took a single step towards the northeast and easily avoided the attack. With a loud sound, 'ka-la!', this palm attack from the Divine Crocodile shattered a tea table. With all his willpower, Duan Yu focused, then softly recited, "See my body, advance and retreat. Follow his back, do not capture him. Go to the front courtyard, see nobody present. Hide both sides of the urn, go to a strategic place. Peel, disadvantageous to go towards the construct. The ram and goat touch the border, they cannot retreat, nor can they be fulfilled."

He ignored the origins of the Divine Crocodiles palms, focusing only on his own footwork, retreating and dodging with strange, slanted steps. The twin palms of the Divine Crocodile became faster and faster, and the force of his blows stronger and stronger. A ceaseless stream of cracking sounds continually could be heard from within the flower pavilion as the chairs, tables, teapots, and teacups were shattered one after another. But he couldn't land a single blow on Duan Yu's body.

More than three stances passed in the blink of an eye. The two brothers, Emperor Baoding and the South-Subduing Prince, could easily tell that Duan Yu's technique was shallow, and that he possessed no martial arts at all. Only, they could not discern how he received instruction from an elite martial artist and received an almost divine footwork

skill, striding in the positions of Fuxi's sixty four trigrams. His first step would always be unimaginably queer. If he were really to fight with the Divine Crocodile, he would die underneath the opponent's very first palm. But he didn't bother to fight, and just focused on walking around. Although the Divine Crocodile palms were extremely fierce, he couldn't lay a single finger on Duan Yu.

After watching for a while, the two brothers exchanged glances. A hint of worry had appeared on both of their faces. They both thought, "If the Divine Crocodile just closed his eyes and ignored Yu'er's footwork, opting instead to randomly flail out with punches and palms, he'll hit him sooner or later." But they saw that the Divine Crocodile's face grow more and more yellow, his eyes bulging more and more wide, not having thought of this method. His palm attacks fluctuated rapidly, but always would miss Duan Yu's body by a third or two thirds of a meter.

If the fight continued, although Duan Yu would not be hurt, actually beating the opponent would be impossible as well. After watching a while, Emperor Baoding suddenly said, "Yu'er, slow your footsteps by a half. Face him directly, and grab the acupoint on his chest."

Duan Yu answered, "Yes!" He slowed down his footsteps, then turned to face the Divine Crocodile and walked towards him. But upon facing the furious yellow countenance of the Divine Crocodile, fear suddenly struck him. His footsteps faltered just a little, causing him to move slightly out of position. The Divine Crocodile sent out a claw towards the left side of Duan Yu's head, connecting and causing blood to immediately flow from his left ear. Feeling pain from his wounded ear, Duan Yu became even more timid. He increased the speed of his footsteps, hurriedly backing up and once again hiding behind Duan Zhengchun. With a forced smile, he called out, "Uncle, that won't work!"

Duan Zhengchun roared furiously, "The members of the Dali Duan dynasty face their enemies boldly. Which one is

cowardly and retreats to hide? Go out there and fight! Your uncle's instructions were good." The Sage of Hollow Jade, doting on her son, interjected, "Yu'er has already fought with him for sixty stances or more. The Duan family has produced such a wonderful scion, and you still think it isn't enough? Yu'er, you won long ago. No need to fight any more." Duan Zhengchun said, "Do not be afraid. I can guarantee that he won't die." The Sage of Hollow Jade felt bitterness in her heart, and her eyes began to fill with tears.

Seeing his mother in such a state, Duan Yu couldn't bear it. His courage rose again, and he boldly strode forwards. He loudly proclaimed, "I'll fight with you some more!" This time, he hardened his heart and began to walk in a circular pattern, with each step slower than the previous. He didn't make eye contact with the Divine Crocodile, and instead just struck out at the latter's chest with a palm.

The Divine Crocodile saw that there was no strength at all behind his blow. With a loud laugh, he slanted his body slightly and returned a claw attack against Duan Yu's shoulder and head. But he didn't imagine Duan Yu's footwork would be so incredibly profound and ever-changing that the two moved their positions at exactly the same moment. As the two ran into each other, the Divine Crocodile's chest was somehow right where Duan Yu's finger was. Duan Yu clearly saw the location of his acupoints, and with his right hand immediately seized the enemy's Shanzhong acupoint, while his left hand grasped the opponent's Shenque acupoint.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to use his internal energy at all. Although Duan Yu had grabbed two of the opponent's acupoints, if the Divine Crocodile just ignored him and shrugged him off without the use of internal energy, there would be nothing Duan Yu could do at all. But when the vital acupoints of the Divine Crocodile were seized, the Divine

Crocodile's heart suddenly leapt, and he extended both his hands in a frontal attack against his enemy.

This attack actually served the purpose of defense. He was attacking Duan Yu's eyes. In martial arts learning, this was considered "an attack which absolutely must be defended against". No matter how strong the enemy was, he would still have to retract his hands to defend himself, and thus the person originally in danger would have escaped from the dangerous situation. Originally, this was a brilliant way of fighting. Unfortunately, Duan Yu didn't understand anything about fighting an enemy. As the opponent's claw attack arrived, he didn't think to immediately let go and retreat backwards. His two hands remained firmly attached to the Divine Crocodile's acupoints.

This mistake which Duan Yu made became a benefit for him instead. As a result, the Divine Crocodile's internal energy was thrown into turmoil, the flow of which was being blocked at two separate major acupoints. At the same time, once again his internal energy began to flood out of him from his Shanzhong acupoint. As his fingers reached a distance of six inches away from Duan Yu's eyes, they became disobedient and refused to budge a single inch further. Taking a deep breath, he once again tried to generate his internal energy.

Duan Yu suddenly felt an enormous surge of energy coming towards him from the Shaoshang acupoint on his left thumb. The Divine Crocodile's internal energy was very powerful, on a totally different level from those seven low level disciples of the Wuliang sect. Duan Yu felt his entire body tremble and his footing became unsteady. He knew that the situation was extremely dangerous. As soon as he removed his hands from his opponent's acupoints, his life would be in jeopardy. Although he felt extremely uncomfortable, he just forced himself to ignore it.

Duan Zhengchun and Duan Yu were no more than a meter or two's distance away from each other. Seeing his

son's face grow more and more red, Duan Zhengchun struck out with his forefinger towards the Dazhue acupoint on his son's back. The Dali Duan dynasty's "Solitary Solar Finger" [Yiyangzhi] was world-renown; it really was nothing to trifle with. A sudden surge of warm, soft energy streamed towards Duan Yu, arousing the internal energy which already resided in Duan Yu's body.

The Divine Crocodile's entire body was shaking violently, and he slowly fell down. Duan Zhengchun supported his son and kept him standing. Duan Yu's internal energy began to circulate and smoothed out again. The energy from the Divine Crocodile's Shoutaiyingfei acupoint slowly and unhurriedly began to collect in the ocean of internal energy in Duan Yu's body. For the moment, Duan Yu was unable to speak.

Duan Zhengchun secretly used his "Solitary Solar Finger" to assist his son, and with their combined efforts, managed to subdue the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas. Everybody in the pavilion understood this, of course, but there would nonetheless be no way for the Divine Crocodile to deny that he had lost to Duan Yu.

But this man's ability really was incredible. As soon as Duan Yu's hands left his acupoints, with a deep breath and circulation of his energy, the Divine Crocodile leapt to his feet. Narrowing his pair of bean-like eyes, he glared at Duan Yu. An utterly strange look was on his face, a mixture of astonishment, sadness, and wrath.

Mu Wanqing shouted, "Yue Number Three! It seems to me that you really are willing to be a bastard son of a turtle! Are you ready to kowtow to your master yet?" The Divine Crocodile angrily roared back, "I'm going to blow your mind and do something you don't expect at all! Fine, I'll accept him as my master. Yue Number Two will definitely not be a bastard son of a turtle!" While speaking, he suddenly immediately knelt down on the spot. Dong, dong, dong dong. Dong, dong, dong dong. His head knocking against

the ground, he kowtowed to Duan Yu eight times in a row. Loudly, he proclaimed, "Master! Your disciple, Yue Number Two, is paying his respects to you!"

Stupefied, Duan Yu didn't immediately respond. Not waiting for him to answer, the Divine Crocodile jumped to his feet then flew to the top of the pavilion. There was an "Ah!" cry from the top, followed by a "peng" sound. Suddenly, a person dropped from the top of the pavilion. It was one of the imperial bodyguards, and fresh blood dripped from his chest. His heart had already been torn out by the Divine Crocodile. His arms and legs flailing madly, he hadn't died yet. It was an extremely frightful sight. Although this bodyguard's martial arts was not as good as that of Chu Wanli and the others, it wasn't ordinary either. Unexpectedly, the Divine Crocodile was able to easily rip his heart out as quickly as another man might lift his hands. Even though the Four Great Bodyguards were nearby, they were unable to save him. The faces of every person present changed color.

Mu Wanqing angrily said, "Husband Duan, this disciple you have taken acts too outrageously! Next time you meet him, you need to teach him a lesson." Duan Yu's heart was thumping frantically. "I won only because I was lucky, and because my father lent his aid. If I see him again, I'm afraid that it will be my heart that gets torn out by him. What ability do I have to discipline him?"

Gu Ducheng and Fu Sigui took out the corpse of the guardsman. Duan Zhengchun issued orders to provide for his bereaved family, and to arrange for a proper burial.

That Mr. Huo, who was seventy percent awake and thirty percent drunken, was so terrified that his body was trembling nonstop. He also withdrew.

Emperor Baoding said, "Yu'er, that set of footsteps you learned was derived from Fuxi's sixty four trigrams, was it not? Who taught it to you? He must truly be a brilliant master." Duan Yu replied, "I learned it by accident in a

mountain cave. I don't know if I learned it properly or not. Will uncle please instruct me?" Emperor Baoding asked, "How exactly did you learn it in a mountain cave?"

Duan Yu then explained how he fell into the Wuliang mountain ravine and entered the cavern, and discovered the painting with the instructions for the "Graceful Steps on the Waves". With regards to the jade sculpture and the paintings of naked women and what not, he naturally did not bring them up. These naked paintings of his Dear Goddess, how could he show them to his uncle, aunt, father, and mother? And if Mu Wanning found out that he was infatuated with his Dear Goddess, she would be furious. Leaving out details in a story would be like Confucius whittling away at unnecessary parts of the Spring and Autumn period, just the wish of the storyteller.

After Duan Yu was finished, Emperor Baoding said, "Within this sixty four trigram footwork is hidden a first-class internal energy. Try walking the entire thing from the beginning." Duan Yu said, "Yes!" After a moment's thought, he began the footwork. Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun, and Gao Shengtai all had very profound internal energy. But despite that, they were only able to understand twenty to thirty percent of the profound secrets of the internal energy method hidden within the footwork. After finishing all sixty four trigram footsteps, Duan Yu had walked in a circle, and was back at his original position.

Emperor Baoding exclaimed, "Superb! This set of footwork has no equal under heaven. That Yu'er was able to learn it is his incredible good fortune. Tonight, your mother will return to her palace. Yu'er, be sure to drink a few cups of wine with your mother." Turning his head, he said to the Empress, "Let us leave." The Empress, rising to her feet, agreed. "Yes, let's."

Duan Zhengchun and the others respectfully escorted the Emperor and the Empress out, all the way to the outside of the decorate arch of the South-Subduing Palace.

Chapter 7: Boundless Regrets of Profligate Love

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

Duan Zhengchun and the others returned to his palace, where a feast had been prepared. At the banquet table, aside from Duan Zhengchun and his wife, and Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing, no one else was present save the servants, which numbered seventeen or eighteen. In her entire life, how could Mu Wanqing have seen or experienced such splendor and luxury? She had neither heard of nor ever seen any of the dishes which were being presented.

She saw that Duan Zhengchun and his wife were treating her like a member of the family. It were as though two generations of husband and wife were happily dining together. Her affection was won by this display.

Duan Yu saw that his mother was continuing to treat his father somewhat coolly. She neither drank, nor ate any meat. The only dishes she touched were some vegetarian dishes. Duan Yu poured out a cup of wine, then, holding it with both hands, rose to his feet. "Mother, your son would like to offer you a cup. My respectful congratulations on you and father reconciling. Finally, our family of three can enjoy domestic bliss again."

The Sage of Hollow Jade replied, "I don't drink wine." Duan Yu poured out yet another cup of wine, then winked towards Mu Wanqing. "Miss Mu would also like to offer you a cup." Taking the cup with both hands, Mu Wanqing also rose to her feet.

The Sage of Hollow Jade felt that it wouldn't be appropriate to act too coldly towards Mu Wanqing. She let out a small smile. "Miss, this son of mine is extremely naughty. We, his parents, aren't able to control him. In the

future, you'll have to help us keep him under control." Mu Wanqing replied, "If he's disobedient, I'll grab him by his ears and beat him!"

The Sage of Hollow Jade let out a surprised laugh, then glanced at her husband out of the corner of her eye. Duan Zhengchun laughed. "That's how it should be."

The Sage of Hollow Jade extended her left hand to accept the wine cup from Mu Wanqing. Underneath the flickering candlelight, Mu Wanqing saw that her hand was delicate and fine, as clear and lustrous as fine jade. On the back of the Sage's hand, she saw some sort of mark, as red as the color of blood. Mu Wanqing's entire body began to tremble. "You...your name...is your name, Dao Baifeng?"

The Sage of Hollow Jade smiled. "My family name is very rare and unusual. How did you know?" Mu Wanqing's voice shook. "You...you are Dao Baifeng? A woman of the Baiyi tribe? Once, you wielded a soft whip as your weapon? Am I right?" The Sage of Hollow Jade saw that her expression seemed strange, but didn't harbor any misgivings against the girl. Smiling, she said, "Yu'er really is good to you. He even told you my full name. Your husband is also half Baiyi, which is probably why he acts so wildly."

Mu Wanqing asked, "You truly are Dao Baifeng?" The Sage of Hollow Jade smiled a little. "Yes, I am."

Mu Wanqing shouted, "A master's benevolence is very profound, a master's orders cannot be disobeyed!" With a lift of her right hand, she shot out two poisoned quarrels towards Dao Baifeng's chest. During the banquet, the four of them had talked and laughed together as though they were part of one family. Who could have foreseen that Mu Wanqing would suddenly attack?

Dao Baifeng's martial arts were roughly at the same level as Mu Wanqing to begin with. But at this moment, the distance between them was extremely short, and this attack was so unexpected that she wasn't able to defend herself. It seemed as though those two poisoned quarrels would hit her

no matter what. Duan Zhengchun was sitting on the other side of the table, behind Mu Wanqing. He called out, "Aiyo!" He immediately struck out with a finger, but this finger could only hit Mu Wanqing, and could not save his wife.

Duan Yu had seen Mu Wanqing kill people with those poisoned quarrels many times, and knew that the venom was extremely lethal. In a very short time, the victim's blood would coagulate and choke off the victim's throat. As soon as he saw her wave her sleeves, he immediately knew something was wrong. He was sitting by his mother's side, but unfortunately did not know any martial arts. There was no way for him to deflect this attack. He sprang to his feet, immediately executing his "Graceful Steps Upon the Waves". With a slanting horizontal motion, he quickly positioned himself in front of his mother. Bo, bo! The two poisoned quarrels struck him directly in the middle of his stomach. At the same time, Mu Wanqing's back and heart suddenly felt numb, and she fell face-first towards the table, unable to move.

Duan Zhengchun, seeing the desperate situation, flew towards Duan Yu and immediately sealed the eight acupoints surrounding the area where Duan Yu had been struck by the quarrels. This would prevent the poison from spreading throughout the rest of his body for a time. With a flip of his hand and a cracking sound, he immediately dislocated Mu Wanqing's right arm, preventing her from firing off any more quarrels. Then he unsealed her acupoints. In a stern voice, he said, "Give me the antidote!"

Mu Wanqing's voice trembled. "I...I only wanted to kill Dao Baifeng. I didn't want to harm my darling Duan." Resisting the pain from her dislocated right arm, she reached towards the bosom of her clothes and withdrew two bottles filled with an extract of flowers. "The antidote in the red bottle should be taken internally, and the antidote in the white bottle should be applied externally. Hurry! If you take too long, we won't be able to save him!"

Dao Baifeng saw that her concern for Duan Yu was genuine and unfeigned. She had already roughly guessed the reasons behind the girl's actions. Stretching out her hand, she immediately snatched the medicine. She placed two red pills within her son's mouth. The other bottle was filled with a white powder. She grabbed the end of the quarrels and lightly pulled the two out, then applied a layer of the medicinal powder on top of the wound. Mu Wanqing said, "Thank heaven! He...his life won't be in danger now, otherwise I...I..."

The three people were extremely anxious. They did not know that Duan Yu had consumed the "King of Ten Thousand Poisons", the Cinnabar Toad, and that he was immune to all poisons. The venom on Mu Wanqing's quarrels couldn't do anything to him. Even if the antidote had not been applied, he would have been fine. However, after being shot with the quarrel, Duan Yu felt twinges of pain in his chest. After seeing the lethal effectiveness of the poisoned quarrels so many times, Duan Yu truly believed that he was definitely going to die. In his panic, he fainted within his mother's arms.

Watching carefully, Duan Zhengchun and his wife noticed that within a twinkling of the eye, the color of the blood flowing from Duan Yu's wound had changed. First, it had changed from black to purplish; then, it had turned from purplish to red. Only now did they let out a sigh of relief, knowing that their son's life was saved.

Dao Baifeng carried her son to his bedroom and covered him with a quilt. She took his pulse, and felt that his pulse was strong and steady. There wasn't the slightest sign of any weakness, causing her to be extremely happy. So assured, she returned once more to the dinner hall.

Duan Zhengchun asked, "No problems?" Dao Baifeng did not answer. Instead, she turned to Mu Wanqing and said, "Go tell the 'Asura Sabre' [In Buddhist mythology, Asuras are malevolent spirits], Qin Hongmian..." As soon as Duan

Zhengchun heard the six words, “ ‘The Asura Sabre’, Qin Hongmian”, he said, “You...you...” Dao Baifeng paid no mind to her husband, continuing to address Mu Wanqing. “Tell her that if she wants to take my life, she should make her attempts openly and honestly. Acting with such maliciousness and deceptiveness, isn’t she afraid that people will laugh their heads off?” Mu Wanqing replied, “I don’t know who this ‘Asura Sabre’, Qin Hongmian is.” Baffled, Dao Baifeng asked, “Then who is it that ordered you to kill me?”

Mu Wanqing said, “My master. She ordered me to kill two people. The first person was you. She told me I could identify you by a red mark on your hand. She told me that you are named Dao Baifeng, are of the Baiyi tribe, are very beautiful, and wield a soft whip as your weapon. She...she didn’t tell me that you dressed up like a nun. I saw that your weapon was a flywhisk, and are called the ‘Sage of Hollow Jade’. I never thought...never thought that you are the person whom Master wishes to kill. Much less that you are Duan Yu’s mother...” And as she finished, teardrops cascaded down her face.

Dao Baifeng said, “The second person your master asked you to kill, is it the “Lovely Yaksha” Gan Baobao?” Mu Wanqing replied, “No, no! The “Lovely Yaksha” Gan Baobao is my martial uncle. She sent people to deliver a message to my master. She said that two people had caused great pain to my master all her life, and that this great wrong must be avenged no matter what...” Dao Baifeng said, “Ah, I understand. The other woman is surnamed Wang and lives in Suzhou, right?” Surprised, Mu Wanqing said, “Right. How did you know? I went with my Master to Suzhou to kill her, but this evil woman had a lot of flunkies under her command. Her dwelling was also very strange. Not only was I unable to find her, but her flunkies chased me all the way to Dali instead.”

Duan Zhengchun listened with his head bowed. The color of his face alternated from blue to red.

A tear suddenly rolled down Dao Baifeng's cheek. She said towards Duan Zhengchun, "Please take good care of Yu'er and instruct him well. I...I'm leaving now." Duan Zhengchun said, "Dearest phoenix [the 'feng' character in Baifeng stands for phoenix], that's all in the past. Why are you taking it to heart?" Dao Baifeng said softly, "You aren't taking it to heart, but I am, and so are other people." Suddenly, her body flew into the air, and she leapt towards a window.

Duan Zhengchun extended his hand to grasp at her sleeve, but Dao Baifeng waved her own and shot a palm towards his face. Duan Zhengchun turned his face to avoid the blow. With a tearing sound, he ripped off half of her sleeves with his hand. Turning her head, Dao Baifeng said angrily, "Are you really intending to fight me?" Duan Zhengchun said, "Dearest phoenix, you..." With a kick of her legs, Dao Baifeng shot into the air, landing on the top of a nearby room. Within a few movements, she had already moved a hundred feet away.

From far away, Chu Wanli's voice could be faintly heard. "Who is it?" Dao Baifeng replied, "It's me." Chu Wanli said, "Ah, so it is the princess..." After this, nothing more could be heard. Dao Baifeng was far away.

Duan Zhengchun sadly remained standing for a long time. Then, with a sigh, he returned to the warm pavilion. He saw that Mu Wanqing's face was extremely pale, but that she had not fled. Duan Zhengchun reached out and took a hold of her right arm with his hands. With a "ka" sound, he popped her dislocated arm back in place. Mu Wanqing thought to herself, "I attacked his wife with poison quarrels. I wonder how he is going to torture me?" But Duan Zhengchun only sat down dispiritedly and slowly poured himself a cup of tea. With a 'gu' sound, he drained it all in one go.

Duan Zhengchun stared at the window from which his wife had fled as though he were in a trance. After a long time passed, he slowly poured himself a second cup of tea. 'Gu'. He drained this one in one go as well. Pouring a cup, draining a cup. He repeated this twelve or thirteen times. After finishing the pot of tea, he reached out and grabbed another pot, this one filled with wine. As with before, he poured very slowly, but drank extremely quickly.

Finally, Mu Wanqing became impatient. "What type of strange, vicious way of punishing me are you devising? Whatever it is, hurry up and use it!"

Duan Zhengchun lifted his head to stare at her. After some time had passed, he shook his head and sighed. "So similar. So very similar! I should have realized a long time ago. Your appearance. Your temper..."

Mu Wanqing had no idea what he was babbling about. "What are you talking about?" She asked. "You're full of rubbish!"

Duan Zhengchun did not reply. Rising to his feet, he sent a backwards palm with his left hand. With a swishing sound, a candle was extinguished by his palm wind. He immediately followed this with another backwards palm with his right hand. A second candle was unexpectedly snuffed out. In this manner, he sent out five palms behind him and extinguished five candles. All throughout, his gaze was towards the front, and yet the palms flowed out like rolling clouds or running water, with natural ease.

Mu Wanqing said in shock, "This is...this is the 'Five Gentle Smoke Palms'. How do you know this skill?" Duan Zhengchun laughed bitterly. "Did your master teach it to you?" Mu Wanqing said, "My master told me that she would never teach this to anyone, and that she would take it to her coffin with her." Duan Zhengchun nodded. "Huh. She said that she would never teach it to anybody, and that she would take it to the grave?" Mu Wanqing said, "Right! But whenever she thought I wasn't watching, she would often

practice this set of palms by herself. So I'm used to seeing it by now." Duan Zhengchun said, "She would often practice this set of palm strokes by herself?" Mu Wanqing nodded. "Yes. Every time after she was done practicing this set of palms, she would become very angry and curse me out. How...how is it that you know it as well? And it seems as though you're even more skilled in it than my master!"

Duan Zhengchun let out a sigh. "This 'Five Gentle Smoke Palms' was taught by me to your master."

Mu Wanqing was shocked, but she couldn't help but believe him. She saw in the past that when her master practiced this art, that often there would be one candle that she couldn't extinguish, and would force her to have to send out a second or third palm. Her skill definitely was not as high as that of Duan Zhengchun, who exercised the set of palms as his heart desired, as though he were effortlessly wiping away wine. She stuttered, "So you are my master's master...so you would be my grandmaster?"

Duan Zhengchun shook his head. "No!" Resting his cheek on one hand, he mused to himself, "So every time after she practiced this set of palms, she would be angry. She said that she wouldn't teach anyone this skill, and would take it to her grave..." Mu Wanqing asked, "Then you..." Duan Zhengchun waved his hand, signaling for her to stop asking. After a while, he suddenly asked, "You are eighteen this year. You were born in September, right?" Mu Wanqing sprang to her feet. Shocked, she asked, "How do you know everything about me? What relation do you have with my master?!"

A look of great pain was on Duan Zhengchun's face. In a hoarse voice, he said, "I...I unforgivably wronged your master. Wan'er, you..." Mu Wanqing asked, "Why? From what I've seen, you have a kind disposition and are a good person." Duan Zhengchun said, "Your master has never told you her name?" Mu Wanqing said, "My master told me that she is called the 'Guest of the Secluded Valley'. Her real name or her surname, I have no idea." Duan Zhengchun

softly repeated to himself, “ ‘Guest of the Secluded Valley’...‘Guest of the Secluded Valley’...” Suddenly, he remembered Du Fu’s [one of China’s most famous poets] poem, ‘Beautiful Maiden’. Every single word in the poem suddenly tingled in his heart. *“A peerless beauty, residing in an empty valley. She proclaims herself as being from a good family, but is fallen like rotted trees or decayed grass. Her husband is a philanderer, and his new woman is as beautiful as jade. Hearing the new woman laugh, the previous wife can but cry...”*

After a long time, he asked again. “How has your master lived her life, all these years? Where have you lived?” Mu Wanqing replied, “My master and I have lived in a deep valley which was hidden behind a tall mountain. My master said that it was called the ‘Secluded Valley’. It wasn’t until now that the two of us left it.” Duan Zhengchun said, “Who are your parents? Your master never told you?” Mu Wanqing said, “My master told me that I am an orphan who was abandoned by my parents. She found me by the side of a road and took me in and raised me.” Duan Zhengchun asked, “Do you hate your mother and father?” Mu Wanqing inclined her head. She lightly bit at the pinky of her left hand.

Seeing this, Duan Zhengchun felt an boundless distress in his heart. Mu Wanqing saw two large tears roll down his face. Very much surprised, she asked, “Why are you crying?” Duan Zhengchun turned his face away, drying his tears. With a strong laugh, he said, “How was I crying? I drank too much. The alcohol is taking effect.” Mu Wanqing didn’t believe him. “I clearly saw you cry. Only women cry. Men cry as well? I’ve never seen a male cry, besides little children.”

Duan Zhengchun saw that she was inexperienced with worldly affairs, and felt even more miserable. “Wan’er, in the future, I promise to take good care of you. I will try to make

up for my past mistakes. If there's anything you desire, just let me know, and I will definitely obtain it for you."

Mu Wanqing had just shot poisoned quarrels towards his wife. She was feeling very worried, but upon hearing Duan Zhengchun's words, happily said, "I shot quarrels towards your wife. You aren't going to blame me?" Duan Zhengchun said, "It is as you yourself said. 'A master's benevolence is very profound, a master's orders cannot be disobeyed.' The affairs of the previous generation have nothing to do with you. Naturally, I won't blame you. But you must never be disrespectful to my wife again." Mu Wanqing asked, "In the future, if my master starts to ask questions, what shall I say?"

Duan Zhengchun said, "Take me to see your master. I'll personally explain to her." Mu Wanqing clapped her hands. "Great, great!" But immediately, she wrinkled her forehead. "My master often says that all men are people who are faithless and unkind. She never meets men."

A strange expression flashed across Duan Zhengchun's face. "Your master never meets with men?" Mu Wanqing said, "Yes. Whenever my master needs rice or salt, she always has Granny Liang go shop for her. Once, when Granny Liang was sick, she had her son do it instead. Master was extremely angry. She ordered him to place it far away outside, and would not allow him to enter the room."

Duan Zhengchun sighed. "Hongmian, Hongmian. Why must you make your own life so miserable?"

Mu Wanqing said, "You said the words 'Hongmian' again. Who, exactly, is 'Hongmian'?" Duan Zhengchun hesitated for a moment. "This can't be hidden from you forever. Your master's real name is Qin Hongmian. Her nickname is the 'Asura Sabre'." Mu Wanqing nodded. "Ah. No wonder your wife, upon seeing me shoot out those short quarrels, asked me in such an angry manner as to what my relationship was with the 'Asura Sabre', Qin Hongmian. At that time, I really didn't know. I wasn't trying to deceive her on purpose. So

my master's name is Qin Hongmian? It's a very pretty name. I don't know why she didn't tell me it."

Duan Zhengcun said, "I hurt your arm just a while ago. Does it still pain you?" Mu Wanqing saw that a warm, caring expression was on his face. She smiled slightly. "It's much better now. Let's go take a look...take a look at your son. Okay? I'm afraid that the toxin on the quarrel won't disappear immediately." Duan Zhengchun said, "Alright!" As he stood up, he added, "If there's anything you desire, just tell me."

Suddenly, Mu Wanqing flushed, as a blushing red colored her face. Lowering her head, she said, "I'm just afraid...afraid that I shot quarrels towards your wife, and she'll resent me." Duan Zhengchun said, "Let's slowly beg her forgiveness. Maybe in the future, she won't be so angry." Mu Wanqing said, "I'm not the type of person who begs others. But for the sake of my darling Duan, it's no big deal to beg her." She suddenly summoned all her courage and said, "South-Subduing Prince, if I tell you my wish, will you really...will you really achieve it for me?"

Duan Zhengchun said, "So long as it is within my power, I will definitely make your wish become a reality." Mu Wanqing said, "The words you have said, you can't go back on!" A slight smile appearing on his face, Duan Zhengchun walked to her side. Extending his hand, he lightly stroked her hair. His eyes overflowing with love, he said, "I naturally won't go back on my word." Mu Wanqing said, "You must make sure my marriage with him goes through. Don't let him renege on it." After saying this, her face glowed radiantly.

The expression on Duan Zhengchun's face immediately changed. He slowly backed away and sat down in a chair. Quite some time passed without him saying a single word. Mu Wanqing felt something was amiss. Her body quivering, she said, "You...you won't allow it?" Duan Zhengchun said, "You definitely cannot marry Yu'er." His voice was sluggish and slow, but the tone was extremely certain. Mu Wanqing's

heart froze. Sadly, she said, "Why? He...he personally agreed to marry me." Duan Zhengchun only replied, "Karmic sin...karmic sin!" Mu Wanqing said, "If he doesn't want me, I...I will kill him, then kill myself. I swore a heavy oath in front of my master." Duan Zhengchun slowly shook his head. "Can't!" Mu Wanqing impatiently said, "I'm going to go ask him right now. Why can't I?"

Duan Zhengchun said, "Yu'er...he himself...he himself doesn't know." He saw the look of intense suffering on Mu Wanqing's face, identical to the expression which would appear on the face of Qin Hongmian eighteen years ago, when she received the sad news of the passing of a beloved person. He could no longer hold himself back, and the words rushed out of him. "You may not marry Yu'er, and you may not kill him either!" Mu Wanqing said, "Why?" Duan Zhengchun said, "Because...because...because Duan Yu is your brother by blood!"

Mu Wanqing's eyes widened. She could hardly believe her ears. Her voice shaking, she said, "Wha...what? You're telling me Duan Yu is my brother?" Duan Zhengchun said, "Wan'er, do you know who your master is? She is your birth mother. I...I am your father."

Mu Wanqing was both terror-stricken and furious. Not a hint of color could be seen on her face. Stamping her feet, she said, "I don't believe you! I don't believe you! I...I don't believe you!"

Suddenly, a female voice let out a long sigh from outside the window. "Wan'er, let's go home." Mu Wanqing suddenly came to her senses, and called out, "Master!" The window suddenly opened. Outside stood a middle-aged woman. She had a sharp face and two slender eyebrows. Her appearance was extremely attractive. But in her eyes was a mixture of stubbornness and maliciousness.

Duan Zhengchun saw that his former lover Qin Hongmian had suddenly appeared. He was filled with a mixture of

surprise and joy. He called out, "Hongmian, Hongmian. These many past years, I've...I've missed you so painfully."

Qin Hongmian called out, "Wan'er, come out! A home belonging to such a heartless, faithless man. We can't even stay here as guests."

Seeing the expressions on Duan Zhengchun and Qin Hongmian's faces, Mu Wanqing's heart grew still colder. "Master, he...he lied to me. He said you are my mother, and that he is...he is my father." Qin Hongmian replied, "Your mother died long ago. Your father is also dead."

Duan Zhengchun rushed to the window. "Hongmian, come in. Let me gaze upon you a bit longer. Don't leave me. Let's always be together from now on." Qin Hongmian's gaze suddenly brightened, and she happily replied, "You just said that we'd always be together from now on. Are these words of yours sincere?" Duan Zhengchun replied, "Absolutely! Hongmian, there hasn't been a single day that passed where I did not think of you." Qin Hongmian said, "You can bear parting with Dao Baifeng?" Duan Zhengchun hesitated, unable to respond. An awkward expression appeared on his face. Qin Hongmian said, "If you have any pity at all for our daughter, come with me now. You must never think of Dao Baifeng again, and you must never come back here."

Listening to the two speak, Mu Wanqing felt her heart sink lower and lower. Tears began to gather at the corner of her eyes. The forms of both her master and Duan Zhengchun appeared only as blurs. She knew that the two people standing before her really were her parents. Even if she wanted to deny it, she couldn't. These past few days, she had truly fallen deep in love. But it turned out that the man of her dreams, her darling Duan, was actually her step-brother, who had the same father but a different mother. Her dreams of 'flying together like mandarin ducks', of 'growing old white hairs together', all evaporated like mist.

She heard Duan Zhengchun gently respond, "But I am the South-Subduing Prince of Dali. I administer critical

affairs of state both civil and military. I can't leave for even a day..." Only to hear Qin Hongmian harshly say, "Eighteen years ago, these were the words you used. Now, today, eighteen years later, you are using the same words. Duan Zhengchun, oh, Duan Zhengchun! You heartless, faithless man. I...I hate you so much."

Suddenly, from the rooftops of the eastern rooms, could be heard three 'pa' sounds of palms being exchanged. From the west as well could be heard the sounds of people exchanging palms. Immediately afterwards, Gao Shengtai and Chu Wanli's voices said simultaneously, "Assassins! Brothers, remain on guard at your positions. Do not act rashly!"

Qin Hongmian loudly shouted, "Wan'er! You still aren't coming out?"

Mu Wanqing replied, "Yes!" She flew out of the building from the window, throwing herself in the arms of this woman who doubled as her birth mother and as her benevolent master.

Duan Zhengchun said, "Hongmian, are you really going to just leave me like this?" An extreme sense of misery and bitterness permeated his voice.

Qin Hongmian's voice suddenly turned soft and gentle. "Brother Chun, you've been a prince for decades now. Haven't you had enough? Come with me. From now on, I'll be obedient to you and listen to your every word. I won't dare to curse at you even slightly, or hit you a single time. Look at our adorable daughter. Can you possibly not cherish her?" Duan Zhengchun was suddenly moved, and blurted out without thinking, "Alright! I'll go with you!" Qin Hongmian was ecstatic. She stretched out her right hand and waited for him to take it.

Suddenly, a female voice rang out icily behind her. "Martial sister, you...you've been deceived by him once again. He'll humor you a few days. After that, he'll go back to being the prince here." Turning his head, shock filled

Duan Zhengchun's heart. He called out, "Baobao [this can also translate as 'precious' or 'babe']! It's you! You came as well!"

Mu Wanqing turned her head, and saw that the woman who spoke wore a green silk blouse. It was Madame Zhong of the "Ten Thousand Calamity Gorge", her own martial uncle, the "Lovely Yaksha" Gan Baobao. Four people stood behind her. One was Ye Erniang, another was Yun Zhonghe, and the third was the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas, who had so recently arrived and departed. What surprised her all the more was that the fourth person was Duan Yu. The Divine Crocodile's big, meaty hand was clamped on his neck. Whenever he wanted to, he could snap Duan Yu's neck. Mu Wanqing called out, "My darling Duan! Are you alright?!"

Duan Yu had been resting in bed. Slipping in and out of consciousness, he had been abducted from his room by the Divine Crocodile. He hadn't been poisoned at all. The lethality of Mu Wanqing's poisoned quarrels rested in the word 'poison', not in the word 'quarrel'. A minor quarrel wound would cause him no real harm. Stunned into wakefulness by his abduction, he overheard the conversation between his father, Mu Wanqing, and Qin Hongmian. Although he didn't hear everything, he managed to guess eighty or ninety percent of it. Hearing Mu Wanqing continue to address him as 'her darling Duan', sourness filled his heart. "Little sister, from now on, there will be sibling love between the two of us. Things will be the same."

Mu Wanqing angrily replied, "No. No, it isn't the same. You are the first man to ever see my face." But she suddenly remembered that both of them were sired by Duan Zhengchun. Brothers and sisters cannot wed. If anyone in the world had tried to disrupt her marriage, she could shoot out those poisoned quarrels and kill them. But the thing which was preventing her marriage was natural law and the will of heaven. No matter how high her martial arts level

was, or how great her power, there was no way to get around it. Suddenly, she felt that everything around her had turned to gray ash. With a kick of her legs, she rapidly began to run away. Qin Hongmian urgently called, "Wan'er! Where are you going?"

Mu Wanqing didn't even care about her master now. She said, "You harmed me. I'm not going to pay attention to you anymore." And she sped up her footsteps.

As she ran, a palace guardsman extended his arms towards her, barking out, "Who is it?" With a wave of her sleeves, Mu Wanqing shot out her poisoned quarrels, striking the guardsman directly on the throat. She didn't pause at all, and in an instant, disappeared within the darkness of the night.

Duan Zhengchun saw that his son had been taken captive by the Divine Crocodile, and had no idea where his daughter had run off to. Extending a finger, he struck towards the Divine Crocodile. Ye Erniang intercepted him with a palm of her own, chopping towards his wrist veins. Duan Zhengchun flipped his hand, reversing it into a hooking attack. With a laugh, Ye Erniang flicked her middle finger towards the back of his hand. Within the blink of an eye, these two pugilists had exchanged three stances. In his mind, Duan Zhengchun was secretly startled. "So this b.itch is this powerful?"

Extending her hand, Qin Hongmian reached out and pressed her palm against the top of Duan Yu's head. She called out, "Do you want to preserve son's life or not?" Shocked, Duan Zhengchun stayed his hand. He knew that she had always had a terrible temper. She hated his wife, Dao Baifeng, to the core. He feared that in her anger, she might exert her strength and take Duan Yu's life.

He hurriedly replied, "Hongmian, my son was struck by your daughter's poison arrows. His wounds are not light." Qin Hongmian replied, "He's already taken the antidote. He won't die. I'm going to take him away from here for now. I

want to see if you want to be the prince more, or if you want your son more." The Divine Crocodile laughed uproariously. "In the end, this kid will still have to take me as his master." Duan Zhengchun replied, "Hongmian, I'll agree to anything. Just let go of my son."

The love which Qin Hongmian felt for Duan Zhengchun hadn't waned even a little in the eighteen years which had passed. Hearing him speak so anxiously, her heart softened. "You really...really will agree to anything?" Duan Zhengchun replied, "Yes, yes!" Madame Zhong interjected, "Martial sister, are you going to believe the words of this heartless man again? Mr. Yue Number Two, let's go."

The Divine Crocodile straightened his body. While carrying Duan Yu, he suddenly rose in the air. In the blink of an eye, he landed on the roof of the adjoining room. Immediately afterwards, Ye Erniang and Yun Zhonghe followed him, then each struck a palace guardsman and threw them to the ground.

Madame Zhong called out, "Duan Zhengchun! Are we going to have a fight today?"

If Duan Zhengchun summoned all the forces in his palace, he wouldn't necessarily be unable to defeat these people. But his son had fallen into their hands. It would be difficult to obtain victory via force of arms. Not to mention, the relationship between him and the two sisters standing before him was anything but ordinary. In a soft voice, he said, "Baobao, you...you've also come to make things difficult for me?"

Madame Zhong replied, "I am the wife of Zhong Wanchou. What type of nonsense are you speaking? You have no right to address me in such a way."

Duan Zhengchun said, "Baobao, all these years, I've often been thinking of you." Madame Zhong's eyes suddenly reddened. "That day I found out that Duan Yu was your son, my heart...my heart was filled with such agony." Her voice had softened as well. Qin Hongmian called out, "Martial

sister! Are you also going to fall for his lies?" Madame Zhong pulled at Qin Hongmian's hand and yelled, "Alright. Let's go!"

Turning her head, she said, "If you come pay your respects at the Ten-Thousand Calamities Gorge holding Dao Baifeng's head in your hand, maybe we'll return your son to you."

Duan Zhengchun said, "The Ten-Thousand Calamities Gorge?!" He saw that the Divine Crocodile was getting farther and farther away, and that Gao Shengtai and Chu Wanli were leading men to intercept him from all sides. With a sigh, Duan Zhengchun called out, "Worthy brother Gao, let them go." Gao Shengtai called back, "But the young prince..." Duan Zhengchun replied, "We'll slowly think of a way to get him back."

As he was speaking, he flew to Gao Shengtai's side. He called out, "The assassins have retreated. Everyone, return to your original position." With a sway of his body, he then arrived next to Madame Zhong. In a soft voice, he said, "Baobao, have you been well, these past years?" Madame Zhong replied, "Why wouldn't I be well?" Noiselessly, Duan Zhengchun sent out a silent finger and struck her on her 'Zhangmen' acupoint at her waist. Madame Zhong didn't manage to react in time, and her body immediately turned soft. Duan Zhengchun stretched out his left hand and caught her. Pretending to be alarmed, he called out, "Oh no! Baobao, what happened?"

Qin Hongmian was unaware of the trickery which had just occurred. She rushed over to their side and asked, "Martial sister, are you alright?" Duan Zhengchun then struck out with his "Solitary Solar Finger" and sealed off the 'Zhangmen' acupoint on her waist as well. Their vital acupoints struck, Qin Hongmian and Madame Zhong were now trapped in Duan Zhengchun's embrace, and he hugged one of them with each arm. [Translator's note: ROFL!!! What a player...]

The two simultaneously cast him hateful glares, thinking to themselves, "Tricked by him again. Am I really as silly as this? All my life, I've been deceived by him. At a critical point such as this, I still wasn't vigilant against him." Duan Zhengchun called out, "Worthy brother Gao, your internal injuries haven't fully healed yet. Hurry back to your room and rest. Wanli, you take command of the guards and have them remain vigilant." Gao Shengtai and Chu Wanli bowed and obeyed.

Clasping one woman under each arm, Duan Zhengchun returned with them to the insides of the warm pavilion. He ordered the cooks and maids to restart the banquet, once more preparing cups and plates.

After everyone else retired, Duan Zhengchun struck the 'Huantiao' and 'Ququan' acupoints on the two women's legs, preventing them from walking. Then, with a smile, he released the 'Zhangmen' acupoint on their waist. Qin Hongmian shouted loudly, "Duan Zhengchun! You still are trying to bully people..." Duan Zhengchun turned around and clasped his hands to greet them. "I am sorry for my offense. I'll offer you my apologies right here and now." Qin Hongmian angrily responded, "Who wants your apologies?! Release us immediately!"

Duan Zhengchun replied, "The three of us haven't met for over ten years. It's rare that we can meet like this. We have countless things to say to each other. Hongmian, you're always so impetuous. Baobao, you're even more beautiful than before. You look as though you are even younger than when we were together in the past." Madame Zhong did not reply. Qin Hongmian angrily said, "Let me go now! So my martial sister is even more beautiful than before. I guess that means I'm even uglier and more freakish than before! Why would you want to stare at an ugly old hag like me?"

Duan Zhengchun quickly replied, "Hongmian, take a look in a mirror and see for yourself. If you are an ugly old hag,

then when those literary men write essays describing 'peerless beauties', they would have to include the line, "A face which can mesmerize fish and geese, bearing the appearance of an ugly old hag."

Qin Hongmian couldn't help but let out a laugh. She was about to stamp her foot coquettishly, but her legs were paralyzed. Her anger renewed, she replied, "Nobody came here to exchange jokes with you! Grinning and smiling like an idiotic monkey. What type of prince are you?"

Under the candlelight, Duan Zhengchun saw the angry expression on her face and suddenly recalled one evening long ago. His heart was suddenly moved, and he walked forwards and kissed her on the cheek. Qin Hongmian's upper body was not paralyzed, and with a clear, cracking sound, she slapped him on the face. If Duan Zhengchun had wanted to dodge, it wouldn't be difficult at all. But he purposefully let her hit him. In a low voice, he whispered by her ear, "To die beneath the asura sabres, even as a ghost I would roam carefree."

Qin Hongmian's entire body trembled. Tears began to flow down her face, and she began to cry loudly. "You...you are saying these lascivious words again..." In the past, Qin Hongmian wielded a pair of asura sabres as she roamed the jianghu, which is why her nickname became the "Asura Sabre". The day she gave herself to Duan Zhengchun, he had kissed her on the cheek, and she had slapped him on the face. His response was precisely the same two lines which he just uttered. "To die beneath the asura sabres, even as a ghost I would roam carefree." These words had been replayed in her heart thousands of times. At this moment, hearing him once more say these words, she felt both happy and angry, sweet and bitter, as a hundred emotions flooded her.

Madame Zhong said in a low voice, "Martial sister, this fellow excels in using sweet and honeyed words to please others. Are you really going to fall for it again?" Qin

Hongmian said, "Right. Right! I'll never believe your lies again!"

These words were directed towards Duan Zhengchun. Duan Zhengchun walked to Madame Zhong's side. Laughing, he said, "Baobao, let me kiss your face as well. Will you allow me to?" Madame Zhong replied in a stately voice, "I am a married woman. I will not allow anyone to ruin the good name of my husband. If you so much as touch me, I will immediately bite my tongue off and swallow it, suffocating myself and dying in front of you."

Seeing the cold expression on her face, and hearing how resolute and unhesitating her words were, Duan Zhengchun didn't dare to behave with impropriety. He asked, "Baobao, what type of husband did you marry yourself to?" Madame Zhong said, "My husband is ugly in appearance, has a strange temperament, inferior martial arts compared to you, inferior talent compared to you, and certainly does not have your riches and glorious life. But he loves me wholeheartedly, and I treat him the same way. If I, Gan Baobao, do anything to betray him, let heaven punish me and the earth extinguish me, and let ten thousand calamities prevent me from being reincarnated. I'll tell you something right now. The place where I live with him is called the 'Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge'. The name comes from this deadly oath I have sworn."

Duan Zhengchun couldn't help but feel respect in his heart, and no longer dared to bring up their old love from bygone days. But even though he no longer spoke of it, he saw that Gan Baobao's white, tender face was as beautiful as it was in the past, as was her slightly lifted, cherry-red lips. How could he forget about their former passion? Hearing how devoted she was to her husband from her speech, he couldn't help but feel sourness in his heart. He let out a long sigh. "Baobao, I am an unlucky man. I don't have the fortune to be treated so well by you."

Initially...initially, I knew you before he did. Alas! It is my own fault."

Madame Zhong heard the desolate sound of his voice and the profound, sincere emotions in it. These words were not said to deceive her. Once again, her eyes reddened.

The three people silently faced each other, all of their thoughts wandering to the past. In all three of their hearts was a mixture of joy and sorrow.

After a long while, Duan Zhengchun gently asked, "You've kidnapped my son. Why? Baobao, where is your Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge?"

From outside the window, a grating voice said, "Do not tell him." Duan Zhengchun was startled, and thought to himself, "Chu Wanli and the others are standing guard outside. How did this person manage to sneak his way in?" Madame Zhong's face dropped. "Your injuries aren't healed yet. What are you doing here?"

Following her words, a female voice rang out. "Mr. Zhong, please enter." Upon hearing this voice, Duan Zhengchun was even more surprised. He couldn't help but blush fiercely, his face turning red all the way to his ears.

The curtained door to the warm pavilion was parted, and Dao Baifeng walked in. A furious expression was on her face, and behind her followed an exceptionally ugly man with a long, horse-like face.

As it turned out, Qin Hongmian's mission of assassination in Gusu was a failure, and she was parted from her beloved daughter. Consequently, as had been agreed upon, she came south to Dali to visit with her martial sister. The Wang family of Gusu sent Granny Rui and Granny Ping to pursue and attack Mu Wanqing. But because Qin Hongmian fell behind by a bit, her journey was peaceful and undisturbed. After arriving at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, in order to ascertain the situation, she came out with Madame Zhong.

On the road, she came upon the 'Three Evils', Ye Erniang, the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas, and Yun Zhonghe. These 'Three Evils' had been invited by Zhong Wanchou to help assist him in his efforts against Duan Zhengchun, and immediately began discussing the situation with Madame Zhong. Naturally, the matter of the Divine Crocodile having accepted Duan Yu as his master was glossed over. Upon hearing that Mu Wanqing was currently residing within Dali's South-Subduing Palace, Qin Hongmian immediately accompanied them to the palace.

Zhong Wanchou loved his wife even more than his own life, and was an extremely jealous person to begin with. Ever since she had left, he had been very restless and could not find any peace of mind. He no longer cared that his injury was as-yet not fully healed, and secretly left at midnight to follow her. Outside the South-Subduing Palace, he ran into Dao Baifeng, who was about to leave. Both were filled with a belly full of anger. Each began to insult the other, and soon, the two came to blows. After fighting for some time, Dao Baifeng was slowly finding it hard to sustain herself. Then suddenly a person dressed in black flitted past, her face covered with sobs. It was Mu Wanqing. Both of them called out to her, but she ignored them both and fled.

Zhong Wanchou shouted, "I'm going to go find my wife. I don't have the time to spare, fighting you!" Dao Baifeng asked, "Where are you going to find your wife?" Zhong Wanchou replied, "The home of Duan Zhengchun, that thieving dog. If my wife meets up with him, everything will become disastrous!"

Dao Baifeng asked him, "Why will everything become disastrous?" Zhong Wanchou replied, "Duan Zhengchun is full of sweet and honeyed words. He's a pretty boy who knows how to deceive women. I definitely must kill him!"

Dao Baifeng thought to herself, "Zhengchun is in his forties now, and has a large beard. How can he be considered a 'pretty boy'? But he really does have a

playboy's heart. This horse-faced man's words can't be ignored." Inquiring as to who his wife was, she realized that the person was Gan Baobao. She knew long ago that the 'Lovely Yaksha' Gan Baobao was one of her husband's former flames. Her jealousy became all the greater, and she immediately accompanied Zhong Wanchou and returned to the palace.

Even though the palace was tightly guarded, upon seeing the princess, the guardsmen would naturally give way. And so the two easily made their way to the warm pavilion without a single person issuing a warning call. The words which Duan Zhengchun had said to Gan Baobao and Qin Hongmian, his teasing and his flirting, had been heard by both of them from outside the window. Listening, Dao Baifeng was so infuriated that her chest felt as though it would explode. Zhong Wanchou, on the other hand, listening to how properly his wife behaved, was filled with ecstatic joy.

Zhong Wanchou rushed to his wife's side, filled with affection and happiness. He winded around her multiple times, then said, "Baobao, thank you...thank you for being so good to me. If he dares to bully you, I'll fight to the death with him." A long time passed before he realized that his wife's acupoints had been sealed. Turning his head, he barked towards Duan Zhengchun, "Hurry up and unseal my wife's acupoints!"

Duan Zhengchun replied, "My son has been abducted by you. Once you release my son, I naturally will release your lady wife."

Zhong Wanchou stretched out his hands and struck the acupoints on his wife's waist. But no matter how he pinched or struck, he was unable to unseal them. Although his internal energy was very strong, the technique behind the Duan family's "Solitary Solar Finger" was unparalleled under heaven, and outsiders could not hope to counter it. He exerted so much effort that all his muscles bulged.

Madame Zhong was pinched and struck by him repeatedly, causing her to feel both ticklish and pained, but the sealed acupoint on her leg wasn't even slightly opened. Madame Zhong furiously said, "You idiot, stop making a fool out of yourself." Zhong Wanchou angrily stopped his efforts. His fury bottled up with nowhere to go, he exploded, "Duan Zhengchun, come and f.ucking fight with me for three hundred stances!" Grinding his fists and stretching out his palms, he was about to go forward and start fighting.

Madame Zhong said coldly, "Prince Duan, your son has been kidnapped by the Divine Crocodile and the others. Even if my husband wanted them to release him, these evil people might not necessarily do so. Let me and my martial sister go back, and wait for a chance to rescue him. This could conceivably work. At the very least, I can keep them from mistreating your son."

Duan Zhengchun shook his head. "I can't trust in that. Mr. Zhong, go back home. Come back to me with my son, and I will release your wife to you."

Zhong Wanchou was infuriated, and loudly roared, "Your South-Subduing Palace is a shameless place! If my wife is left here, she will be subject to ten thousand dangers." Duan Zhengchun's face reddened. He shouted out, "If such rude words continue to spew forth from your mouth, do not blame me from being discourteous as well!"

After entering the room, Dao Baifeng didn't say a single word. Now, she suddenly spoke. "What is the purpose behind you keeping these two women here? Is it really for Yu'er? Or is it for your own sake."

Duan Zhengchun let out a sigh. "Even you do not trust me." He pointed backwards and struck Qin Hongmian's waist, unsealing her acupoint. Taking another step, he struck towards Madame Zhong's waist as well.

But Zhong Wanchou stepped between his wife and Duan Zhengchun. Shaking his two hands hurriedly, he yelled loudly, "You are a sly and sneaky chap. You are an expert at

taking advantage of women! You aren't allowed to touch my wife's body at all." Duan Zhengchun laughed bitterly, "Although my acupoint-sealing skill is shallow and superficial, outsiders cannot break it easily. If too much time passes, I'm afraid that Madame Zhong's legs will become permanently crippled." Zhong Wanchou angrily retorted, "My beautiful, flower-like wife, as precious as a piece of jade, is currently in perfectly good health. If she becomes a cripple, I'll tear your bastard dog's son into a thousand pieces!" Duan Zhengchun laughed. "You want me to unseal her acupoint, but you won't let me touch her body. What exactly do you want me to do?"

Zhong Wanchou was speechless for a moment. Suddenly, he let out an indignant shout. "Who told you to seal my wife's acupoints? Wait. Crap! When you sealed her acupoints, you already touched her body! I'm going to go poke your wife's body as well!"

Madame Zhong glared at him. She angrily said, "You're talking rubbish again. Aren't you afraid of others laughing at you?" Zhong Wanchou said, "What's there to laugh at? I refuse to let others take such a big advantage over me!"

Just as the dispute was at its noisiest, the curtained door was parted, and a man wearing a yellow satin gown entered. Three long strands of a beard was on his face, which was fine and attractive. It was the Emperor of Dali, Duan Zhengming.

Duan Zhengchun cried, "Imperial brother!" Emperor Baoding nodded. Stretching out with a finger, he pointed towards Madame Zhong. Madame Zhong only felt a warm sensation in the top her dantian [the place where internal energy accumulates] as two warm currents of energy streamed towards her leg. Immediately, her acupoints were unsealed and her blood began to flow unimpeded, and she rose to her feet.

Zhong Wanchou seeing that Emperor Baoding possessed the godlike ability to "Seal Acupoints Through Air", was shocked. Utter amazement filled his face, and his jaw hung

open slackly. He couldn't say a single word. He never would have imagined that someone possessed such an unfathomable ability.

Duan Zhengchun said, "Imperial brother, Yu'er was kidnapped by them." Emperor Baoding nodded. "The Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment has already informed me. Younger brother Chun, if an offspring of the Duan dynasty has been kidnapped by others, then his parents and his uncles will naturally go and rescue him. It is not acceptable for us to hold others hostage."

Duan Zhengchun's face reddened. "Understood!" Emperor Baoding's speech was straightforward and upright, keeping in with his dignity and status. The hidden meaning of his words was thus; "You wanted to keep them hostage, so as to exchange them for your son. Isn't this an act which would tarnish the honorable name of Dali's Duan dynasty? How can we, the majestic, royal scions of Dali's Duan dynasty, use this sort of method against a few female commoners?"

The Emperor was silent for a few moments, then spoke to Zhong Wanchou. "The three of you may leave at your leisure. Within three days, the Duan family will send delegates to your Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge to retrieve our people.

Zhong Wanchou replied, "My Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge is truly a hidden, secretive place. You might not be able to even find it. Would you like for me to give you directions?" He wanted for Emperor Baoding to ask for his assistance, so he could refuse and make things hard for him.

Who would have thought that Emperor Baoding would pay him no mind. With a sweep of his sleeves, Emperor Baoding said, "Escort our guests out."

Zhong Wanchou had an explosive temper, but in front of this majestically composed Emperor Baoding, he found himself utterly bewildered. Upon hearing him say, "Escort our guests out," Zhong Wanchou said, "Fine, we'll leave! All

my life, your old man hates those surnamed Duan the most! There isn't a single good person in the world, who has the surname Duan!"

Grabbing his wife by the hand, he turned to leave the room in a towering rage. Madame Zhong grabbed Qin Hongmian by her sleeve. "Sister, let's go." Qin Hongmian cast a glance at Duan Zhengchun, but saw that he was silent. She couldn't prevent her heart from being filled with a sour pain. She glared fiercely at Dao Baifeng, then lowered her head and left. After the three of them left the room, they leapt up to the rooftops.

Standing at the corner of the eaves, Gao Shengtai bowed slightly, and said, "Escorting our guests out!" From the rooftops, Zhong Wanchou spat, then vehemently replied, "You guys are all false hypocrites. Not a single one of you is a good person!" Exerting his internal energy, he flew from one rooftop to another. Very shortly, he arrived at the palace walls. Once more exerting his energy, he jumped up, extending his left foot to step on the top of the wall.

But suddenly, another person appeared, standing right at the place where he was about to alight. Wearing a broad gown and a loose girdle, it was Gao Shengtai, who had come to escort the guests out as he said he would. Gao Shengtai was initially behind him, but somehow he arrived at the wall before Zhong Wanchou did. He then saw where Zhong Wanchou was about to step, and took the position before Zhong Wanchou had a chance to.

Zhong Wanchou's body was in mid-air. There was no way for him to retreat, nor was there a way for him to change directions. He shouted, "Scram!" He shot out twin palms to attack Gao Shengtai. He thought to himself, "The power of my twin palms is enough to shatter tablets and crack open boulders. If the opponent wants to take it head on, I'll definitely be able to knock him off the wall. Even if his internal strength is on par with mine, I'll be able to borrow

his energy and change direction to stand next to him on top of the wall.” But just moments before his twin palms would have struck the other on his stomach, Gao Shengtai’s body suddenly leaned backwards, as though he were an iron bridge. Both of his feet remained firmly planted on the top of the wall, but he had gotten out of the way of Zhong Wanchou’s twin palms.

Zhong Wanchou, having missed his attack, secretly cried out to himself, “Oh no!” His body had already passed by Gao Shengtai’s reclined form. With his attack having missed, his chest, abdomen, and lower body were totally open to a counter-attack. At this point, the enemy could arbitrarily strike him as he pleased. Fortunately, Gao Shengtai did not strike him at all. As Zhong Wanchou’s feet landed on the ground, he said to himself, “Thank goodness!” Immediately afterwards, Madame Zhong and Qin Hongmian also passed the wall.

Gao Shengtai straightened his body and turned around to face them. “Forgive me for not escorting you any farther!” Zhong Wanchou let out a ‘hng’ sound. Suddenly, his trousers began to fall down. He hastily extended his hand and caught them just in the nick of time, else he would have been utterly humiliated. Only then did he realize that his belt had been broken by Gao Shengtai with a flick of the finger when he flew over Gao Shengtai’s reclining form. If it weren’t for the fact that Gao Shengtai was showing mercy, he would have been struck by this finger on his dantian and turned into a corpse on the spot. He was half alarmed, half angered. With a cough, he turned to once more face the wall and spat out a dense mouthful of phlegm. ‘Pah!’ The phlegm was shot out with great accuracy and great power.

[Translator’s note: Emperor Baoding really is statesmanlike! He truly has the bearing of a regal Emperor.]

Mu Wanqing left the South-Subduing Palace in a daze. She had heard but ignored the hails of Dao Baifeng and Zhong Wanchou. Covering up her face, she sprinted away.

She only felt that in all the vastness of the earth, there wasn't a single place for her to take shelter. In the middle of a wild, mountainous terrain, she blindly ran and leapt about in a state of confusion until the coming of dawn. She was now so exhausted that both of her legs were limp and painful. Only now did she come to a halt. Leaning against a large tree, she stamped her feet and shouted, "I'd rather die! I don't want to live anymore!"

Even though she was filled with resentment and anger, she had no idea who it was her hatred should be directed towards. "My darling Duan wasn't fickle or unfaithful to me. It was just that the stars were misaligned, and he turned out to be my brother by the same father. My master turned out to be my mother. These past years, she toiled and labored so hard to bring me up and raise me. Her benevolence towards me is as weighty as a mountain, how can I possibly blame her? The South-Subduing Prince is my father. But although he was not faithful to my mother, perhaps he had many hidden difficulties which prevented him from being with her. He showed me a pleasant demeanor and showered me with love. He even said that if there was anything I desired, that I needed to only let him know, and he would strive with all his ability to make it happen. Alas, this desire of mine he was simply unable to fulfill. Mother wasn't able to marry father, this was no doubt due to Dao Baifeng's interference. That must be why she wanted me to kill her. But if I were in her shoes, I definitely wouldn't let my darling Duan have a second woman either. And she even entered a convent and became a nun. No doubt, father was faithless towards her as well, causing her to be so broken-hearted. I shot two quarrels towards her outside the Temple of Hollow Jade, but she wasn't angry with me at all. At the palace, I shot two more quarrels towards her and even harmed her beloved only child, but she still didn't make trouble for me. It seems...it seems she isn't a cruel, vicious woman either."

No matter what she thought, she was filled with sorrow. "I need to forget about darling Duan, and never think about him again." This was something that was easily said. But to forget about him just like that was something she simply could not do. Every time Duan Yu's attractive features and slender figure sprang to the fore of her mind, her chest felt as though someone had struck her with a fist. After awhile, she tried to console herself. "In the future, I'll just view him as my elder brother. I used to be a fatherless, motherless orphan. Now all of a sudden, I not only have a father and a mother, but also such a wonderful elder brother. I should be ecstatic. Stupid girl, what are you so sad about?"

But she had already been fallen into love's trap. The more deeply she become entangled, the more deeply it bound her. When she miserably waited for Duan Yu at the peak of Mt. Wuliang for seven days and seven nights, she had become immersed in the webs of love, and would never be able to extricate herself again.

She heard the roaring sound of water unceasing galloping and surging forth. Suddenly, Mu Wanqing's heart became severed from all earthly desires and dreams. She sought only death. She headed towards the sound of running water. After crossing a mountain, she saw the grandiose, majestic sight of the Lancang river falling down from the mountain peak. She took a deep breath. She thought to herself, "All I need to do is steel myself and jump, and I will never have any cares or worries again." Following the mountain slope, she arrived by the side of the river. The morning sun was just rising. Casting its gentle glow upon the jade-like river, it appeared as though a layer of gold had been sheathed on the water. If she really jumped down, then she would never be able to see this beautiful and wondrous sight again, nor any of the other wonderful things in the world.

Standing quietly by the river, her thoughts swirled about like the waves. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she

noticed that several hundred feet away, someone was sitting on top of a large rock. This person was completely still, and was wearing a green gown that was the same color as that of the green cliffs. This was why, even though she had been at the riverside for a long time, she hadn't noticed him. Mu Wanjing cast him a few glances, then thought to himself, "Probably just a corpse."

She could kill with but a lift of her hand, and so naturally wasn't afraid of a corpse. Feeling curious, she quickly walked towards the body to investigate. The man in a green gown was old, with a long beard that stretched down to his chest. He had a pitch-black face, and both of his eyes were wide open and fixed on the center of the river.

Mu Wanjing said, "So it isn't a corpse after all!" After she took a closer look, she noticed that within the eyes of the corpse was a look of great intelligence, and that there was some color in his face. Mu Wanjing extended her hand, waving it beneath his nose to test for breath. It seemed as though there was a sign of breathing, and yet there also wasn't. Next she touched his face. Strangely, it felt both warm and cold. When she extended a hand to touch his chest, it seemed as though his heart was both still and beating. Absolutely baffled, she said, "This person is so strange. If I want to call him a dead person, he seems to have the characteristics of the living. But were I to call him a living person, he seems so much more like a dead person."

Suddenly, a voice said, "I am a living person!"

Mu Wanjing was very surprised. She quickly turned her head, but saw no one behind her. The stones scattered by the riverside were all no bigger than eggs. There was no place for anyone to hide. And while she was inspecting that freak, she had clearly seen that when the sound of that voice entered her ears, that person had not moved his lips at all. She loudly shouted, "Who is playing tricks on me? Are you tired of living?" Retreating two steps, her back was now

towards the river, her eyes closely scanning the other three directions.

She saw nothing, but heard a voice say, "I truly am tired of living." Mu Wanqing's surprise was not small at all. The only person in front of her was this freak, but she clearly saw that his lips hadn't moved. Deciding he wasn't the one who had spoken, she loudly said, "Who is speaking?"

That voice replied, "You are speaking!" Mu Wanqing said, "Who is the person who is speaking with me?" That voice said, "Nobody is speaking with you." Mu Wanqing hurriedly spun around three times, but saw nothing aside from her own shadow.

By now, she had already figured out that the voice must be coming from the freak in a green gown. Summoning her courage, she walked towards him and pressed his lips shut with her hands. Then she asked, "Are you the one speaking to me?" That voice replied, "No!" Mu Wanqing didn't feel the slightest vibration from her fingers on his lips. She asked, "A person is clearly speaking to me. Why are you saying there isn't?" That voice replied, "I am not a person. I am not even myself. I no longer exist in this world."

Mu Wanqing suddenly felt her hair stand on end. She thought to herself, "Can it really be a ghost?" She asked, "You...are you a ghost?" That voice replied, "You yourself said that you do not want to live anymore, and were going to kill yourself and become a ghost. Why are you afraid of a ghost then?" Mu Wanqing forcefully replied, "Who says I'm afraid of ghosts? I fear neither heaven nor earth!" That voice replied, "There is one thing you are afraid of." Mu Wanqing made a 'hngh' sound. "I fear nothing!"

That voice said, "You fear it, you fear it. You fear a perfectly fine husband suddenly turning into your own brother by blood."

These words were like a cudgel strike to her head. Mu Wanqing's legs suddenly felt weak, and she sat down on the ground. After being dazed for a long time, she murmured,

"You're a ghost. You're a ghost." That voice said, "I have a method to change Duan Yu from being your brother to being your husband again." Quivering, Mu Wanqing replied, "You... you're lying to me. This is the will of the heavens. You...you can't change it." That voice said, "Heaven? The lord of heaven deserves to die. He is an a.sshole! No need for us to pay attention to him. I have a way to turn your brother into your husband. Do you want it or not?"

Originally, Mu Wanqing's had been utterly disheartened, and she had felt utterly detached from the world. These words truly came as though they had descended from the skies. Even though she half-believed, half-doubted, she urgently said, "I want it! I want it!" But that voice fell silent.

After a while, Mu Wanqing said, "Who are you? Let me see you. Is that alright?" That voice replied, "You've been staring at me for a very long time now. Haven't you stared enough?" After a moment, it continued, "Even I do not know if I am still myself. Alas!" Only when letting out this long sigh did he betray the feeling of deep sorrow and depression in his heart.

No doubt was left in Mu Wanqing's mind at all that the voice came from the old man in a green gown who sat before her. She asked, "How can you speak without your lips moving?" The man replied, "I am a living corpse. My lips cannot move. My voice comes from my abdomen."

Although Mu Wanqing was highly disciplined, she still had a childish personality at times. Just moments ago, she was feeling extremely sorrowful, but upon hearing that this person claimed that he could speak with his abdomen, she couldn't help but feel fascinated. "Speaking with your stomach? That'd truly be a bizarre thing!" The man in the green robe replied, "Extend your hand and rest it against my belly. Then you'll understand." Mu Wanqing extended her hand and placed it against his stomach. The man in the green robe said, "My stomach is vibrating when I speak. Can you feel it?" Mu Wanqing indeed felt the man's stomach

quiver with every word he spoke. Laughing, she said, "Haha, that's so very weird!" She didn't know that the man in the green robe practiced a form of ventriloquism. There were thousands of puppetmasters and ventriloquists in the world, but to be able to speak with such clarity was truly no easy feat. It could only be achieved with a deep and profound internal energy.

Mu Wanqing circled around him a few times. Closely examining him, she asked, "If your mouth isn't able to move, how do you eat?" The man in the green robe stretched out his hands. One hand gripped his upper lip, whereas the other gripped his lower lip. He pulled his mouth open, then held his mouth open with his left hand while tossing something in his mouth with his right. With a gulping sound, he swallowed it. "That is how."

Mu Wanqing sighed. "Alas! What a pity! If you eat like this, how can you possibly taste your food?" Suddenly, she saw that all of the flesh on his face was stiffened, and he could not close his eyes. Neither expressions of anger nor joy could be seen on this man's face. This was the reason why, when she first saw him, she thought that he was a corpse.

Although her fear had dissipated, she suddenly thought to herself, this person is himself in such dire straits. How can he possibly counter the will of heaven and change her brother into her husband? Evidently, all the words he said earlier were just nonsense. She muttered to herself for a long time, then sighed. Turning her body, she began to walk away. Only to hear that voice say, "I am going to make Duan Yu into your husband. You cannot leave." Mu Wanqing laughed dully, then took a few steps towards the west. Suddenly, she stopped and turned around. "The two of us don't know each other. How can you know what is in my heart? Can it be that you...you know my darling Duan?"

The man in the green robe replied, "That which is in your heart, I naturally am aware of." From the sleeves of his arms

he suddenly withdrew a pair of thin black metal canes. "Let's go!" Tapping the rock on which he sat with his left cane, he suddenly rose into the air. With ease and grace, he landed on the cane over ten feet away. Mu Wanning saw that both of his feet remained in midair, and that he supported himself only on that one metal cane. Despite that, his body remained exceptionally steady. Curious, she asked, "Your two legs..." The man in the green robe said, "My legs were crippled long ago. Enough. From now on, you are no longer allowed to ask questions about me."

Mu Wanning said, "And if I keep on asking?" Just after the fourth word had left her mouth, she felt her legs turn soft. She fell down. The man in green had moved as quickly as a gust of wind and had arrived by her side, then tapped her twice at the back of her knees with a steel cane. He had followed that with a single blow from the cane which had caused pain so deep, it reached her marrow. "Ah!" She let out a loud cry. The man in green tapped her two more times, releasing her sealed acupoints. His movements were so fast as to be unbelievable. Mu Wanning leapt to her feet. Angrily, she said, "You are so impolite!" Unfastening her sleeves, she was about to shoot a quarrel at him.

The man in green said, "If you shoot a quarrel at me, I will spank you. If you shoot ten quarrels at me, I will spank you ten times. If you don't believe me, try for yourself." Mu Wanning thought to herself, "If that quarrel of mine hit him, he would have died on the spot. How could he possibly hit me back? But this man possesses an incredible, godlike ability. His martial arts is even better than that of the Divine Crocodile. I probably wouldn't be able to hit him with my quarrels. It looks like he'll be able to do as he says he will. If he really ended up spanking me, what a humiliation that would be!" She heard the man say, "If you no longer dare to attack me, then obediently listen to my instructions. You may not disobey." Mu Wanning said, "I'm not going to listen to your commands!" But although she was outwardly

defiant, her left hand released the mechanism for shooting out quarrels.

The man in green strode forward, using those two thin black metal canes in lieu of his arms and legs. Walking behind him, Mu Wanqing saw that those two canes were each roughly three feet long. His strides were twice as long as that of ordinary people. Summoning her energy, Mu Wanqing followed him rapidly, only managing to follow him with an effort. The man in green climbed mountains and traversed ravines as though he were walking on flat plains. He did not travel on the mountain paths, but rather made his own way. No matter how rough the terrain was, he would pass through it with ease with the tap of a cane. This put great hardship on Mu Wanqing. Her sleeves and skirts were ripped and torn into many slices by thorns and bushes, but she did not complain or give any signs of weakness.

After crossing several mountain peaks, far off in the distance a large dense copse of trees could be seen. Mu Wanqing thought to herself, "We've arrived at the Ten-Thousand Calamities Gorge." She asked, "What are we doing here?" The man in green turned around. Suddenly, his metal canes flew out. With a 'sou' sound, one knocked on her right leg. Then he said, "Are you going to keep babbling?" Based on Mu Wanqing's temperament, in the past if someone mistreated her like this, even if she knew she was not their match she wouldn't put up with this. But she saw that the man in green's martial arts were so very incredible, and faintly thought in her heart that perhaps he really could help her achieve her dream. She only replied, "Don't think I'm afraid of you! I'm just giving way to you for the time being."

The man in green said, "Let's go!" He did not pass into the forest but rather circled behind the gorge, taking a sloped path. He appeared to be very familiar with the layout of the area. Mu Wanqing wanted to ask him how, but was afraid that he would wave the stick and whack her again. She could only swallow back the question, just as it had

almost exited her lips. She saw that as the road they took continued to twist and turn, it took them farther away from the gorge proper and deeper into the rear of the gorge. In the past, when she came to the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge to meet with her martial uncle Gan Baobao, she had stayed at the gorge for many days. But she had never come here before. She never would have imagined that the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge could have such a wild, desolate, hidden and remote place.

After traveling for several kilometers they arrived within a large wooded area. All around them were ancient trees that stretched far up in the sky. Although the sun was shining brightly, within the woodland it was as dark as dusk. The deeper they went, the more dense the forest growth, until it was necessary to turn their bodies sideways to squeeze through the trees. After walking for a few hundred more feet, she saw two enormous trees which had grown into each other, forming a large, interlinked wall that was impassable. The man in green extended his left cane and lightly waved it behind Mu Wanqing's back. Mu Wanqing's body suddenly rose high up in the air and floated onto the top of the tree wall. Mu Wanqing could only accept this, and she obediently made her way past the tree branches, jumping down on the other side of the tree wall.

A large, empty space appeared before her eyes, with a single lonely stone house in the middle. The appearance of that house was extremely strange. It looked as though it had been formed from boulders which weighed over a hundred thousand jin, much like a little mountain that had an entrance to a cave on its side. The man in green shouted, "Enter!" Mu Wanqing gazed towards the stone house. It was extremely dark inside. Who knew what type of monster might be in there? How could she dare to rashly enter? But she suddenly felt a palm press against her back. She quickly tried to dodge, but the man in green had already exerted his force, pushing her into the stone house.

Mu Wanqing used her left palm to protect her body, executing the stance “Dawn Wind Whisks the Willow” to protect her face. She was afraid that some sort of monster might attack from within the darkness. But all she heard was a rumbling sound as the entrance to the house was suddenly sealed by a heavy object. She was shocked. As she rushed to the entrance to push the object away, she felt that the material under her hand was rough and coarse. It was a gigantic boulder.

She exerted all her strength with her two arms, but couldn't budge the boulder at all. She tried even harder, but felt like ‘a dragonfly trying to push a stone column’. How could she move it? She loudly shouted, “Hey! Why are you imprisoning me here?” Only to hear the man in green reply, “Have you already forgotten the matter which you begged me about?” His voice penetrated the huge boulder via some small cavities on the top of it, and was extremely clear. Mu Wanqing calmed herself down. She saw although the boulder was blocking the entrance, many small openings around it were exposed. Some were a third of a foot wide, others were perhaps one foot. But none of them would allow her to escape.

Mu Wanqing shouted loudly, “Let me out! Let me out!” Nothing came in response from outside. Pressing her eye against a crack, she peered outside. The man in green was in midair, flying over the distant tree wall as though he were a large green bird.

Turning around, she opened her eyes widely. She saw that the room had both a bed and a table, and that someone was sitting on the bed. She was startled, and called out, “You... you...”

That person stood up, then walked forward two steps. He called, “Sister Wan. You came as well?” His voice was filled with surprised joy. It was Duan Yu.

In the middle of her despair, Mu Wanqing suddenly saw her beloved darling. She was so happy that she rushed

towards him, throwing herself into his embrace. Although the light in the stone house was faint, Duan Yu could see that her face was deathly pale, and that two teardrops had forced their way out of her eyes. He held her firmly in his arms. Her two cherry-red lips were quivering, and he couldn't resist lowering his head to give her a kiss.

But just as their lips met, they immediately both thought to themselves, "We're brother and sister. We definitely can't act like this!" Both their bodies shook, and they released each other's arms, each retreating a few steps. The two of them both backed into the stone walls, staring at each other with stricken eyes. "Wah!" Mu Wanqing suddenly began to cry.

In a soft voice, Duan Yu consoled her. "Sister Wan, this is our destiny as is willed by heaven. Don't feel so agonized. To have such a wonderful sister as you fills me with joy." Mu Wanqing repeatedly stomped on the floor. Crying, she said, "I insist on feeling agonized! I refuse to be joyful! If you're really so happy, then you have no conscience!" Duan Yu sighed. "What can be done? Perhaps it would be better if we had never met."

Mu Wanqing said, "It isn't as though I wanted to meet you. Who told you to come looking for me? Even if it weren't for you, I probably still wouldn't have been killed. You harmed my Black Rose and caused her to die. You harmed me and caused me to be unhappy for so long. You harmed me and caused my master to become my mother; you harmed me and caused your father to become my father; you harmed me and somehow caused yourself to become my elder brother! I don't want it. I don't want any of it! Now you've harmed me and caused me to be imprisoned in here. I want out. I want out!"

Duan Yu said, "Sister Wan, it's all my fault. Don't be angry. Let's slowly think of a way to escape." Mu Wanqing said, "I'm not escaping. Dying inside here, dying outside of

here...it's all the same to me. I'm not leaving! I'm not leaving!" Just moments ago, she was loudly shouting, "I want out!" But within the blink of an eye, it had changed to, "I'm not leaving!" Duan Yu knew that her heart was greatly disturbed, and that for now, there would be no way to get through to her. He fell silent.

Mu Wanqing was throwing a fit, but saw that Duan Yu ignored her. She asked, "Why aren't you talking?" Duan Yu replied, "What do you want me to say?" Mu Wanqing said, "Tell me what you are doing here." Duan Yu said, "My apprentice kidnapped me..." Mu Wanqing asked, confused, "Your apprentice?..." Suddenly, she remembered that the Divine Crocodile had accepted Duan Yu as his master. She couldn't help but laugh through her tears. "You should act as a master would, and order him to release you." Duan Yu replied, "I ordered him to do so more than a few times, and put on the demeanor of very stern and imposing master. But he said that he would only release me if I bowed to him and accepted him as master as well." Mu Wanqing said, "Hah! Most likely, you didn't act the part out properly." Duan Yu said, "That's probably how it is. Sister Wan, who is it that caught you?"

Mu Wanqing briefly summarized her meeting with the man in green. But with regards to the matter of 'turning her brother into her husband', she left it out. Duan Yu, hearing that this person couldn't move his lips but could speak with his stomach, was crippled but could move as though he were flying, couldn't help but feel vastly amused. He couldn't help but repeatedly ask Mu Wanqing's questions, his tongue clicking incessantly.

The two of them chatted for a long time. Then suddenly, with a cracking sound, a bowl was passed into the room via a hole in the boulder. A voice said, "Eat!" Duan Yu reached out and took the bowl. He saw that inside it was a dish of fragrantly cooked 'red-roasted pork'. Next, the man passed in ten or so steamed buns. Duan Yu put both the dishes and

the steamed buns on the table. In a low voice, he whispered, "Do you think there is any poison in the food?" Mu Wanqing replied, "If they wanted to kill us, it would be an easy task. No need for them to poison us."

Duan Yu thought that this made sense. He was also extremely hungry, and said, "Then let's eat!" Clamping some of the pork inside a steamed bun, he handed one to Mu Wanqing. Then he started to eat as well. The person outside said, "After eating, put the bowl outside. Someone will come to take it." After he finished speaking, he immediately left. Mu Wanqing peered past the boulder. She saw that person pull himself up past the tree wall, then descend on the other side. She thought to herself, "The person who delivered food has only an ordinary skill." Walking back to Duan Yu's side, she started to eat the pork and the steamed buns.

While eating, Duan Yu said, "Don't be worried. My father and uncle will definitely come to rescue us. Although the Divine Crocodile and Ye Erniang's martial arts might be high, they aren't necessarily a match for my father. And if my uncle himself comes? It will be like the wind scattering the leaves. They'll flee at the mere sight of his oncoming force." Mu Wanqing let out a 'hng' sound. "He's just the Emperor of Dali. What's so special about his martial arts? I don't believe he can beat the man in the green robe. He'll probably just lead a few thousand armored cavalry and invade this place." Duan Yu repeatedly shook his head. "Not so, not so! The ancestor of the Duan lineage used to be a respected figure within the wulin of the Central Plains. Even though he became the Emperor of Dali, he wouldn't dare forget about the rules of the wulin. If he took advantage of his position to bully others, and achieved victory by superior force of numbers, wouldn't Dali's Duan dynasty be derided by all the heroes of the world?"

Mu Wanqing nodded. "I understand. Even after the people of your family became Emperors and princes, they

were unwilling to throw away their standing as heroes of the jianghu.” Duan Yu said, “My uncle and my father often tell me, this is the meaning of the saying, ‘A person must not forget his origins’.” Mu Wanqing made a contemptuous sound. “Pei! Their mouths are full of righteousness and morality, but they act in shameless and despicable ways. Since your father already had your mother, why would he come after my master as well?”

Startled, Duan Yu said, “Eh?! How can you insult my father? He’s your father too, you know. Besides, of the princes and dukes in the world, how many of them don’t had multiple wives? Even if they had eight or ten wives, it still wouldn’t be a big deal.”

Actually, during the Northern Song dynasty, the north was occupied by the Khitan, the center was occupied by the Great Song, the northwest was occupied by the Western Xia, the southwest ruled by Tibet, and the south by Dali. The princes and dukes of these five countries all had, in addition to a ‘formal wife’, a large number of concubines. At the very least, they would have three or four; some even had dozens. Even high ranking nobles or officials would have a few concubines. This is how it had been since ancient times, since the beginning of the imperial system. Most people had long since accepted it as a matter of course. [Translator’s note: Jinyong and his bloody history lessons....]

Hearing his words, anger swelled in Mu Wanqing’s heart. She dealt Duan Yu a heavy blow right on his cheeks. A loud cracking sound could be heard, loud, sharp and clear. This blow knocked him silly, causing the half-eaten steamed bun in his hand to fall to the ground. All he could say was, “You...you...”

Mu Wanqing angrily said, “I refuse to acknowledge him as my father! If a man takes on multiple wives, then he has no conscience. If a person has split desires and a split mind when it comes to love, then that person is faithless and heartless.” Gently caressing his swollen cheeks, Duan Yu let

out a bitter laugh. "I'm your elder brother. As my little sister, how can you be so disrespectful towards me?" The grief and anger in Mu Wanqing's heart was difficult to bear. Upon hearing these words, she struck at him again.

This time, Duan Yu was prepared. With a slip of the foot, he exercised his "Graceful Steps Upon the Waves" and dodged behind her. Mu Wanqing sent out a palm backwards, but Duan Yu avoided that one as well. Although the square room was only around ten feet in diameter, the "Graceful Steps Upon the Waves" truly was a wondrous skill. Mu Wanqing's palm attacks came faster and faster now, but she wasn't able to hit him again.

Mu Wanqing was all the more infuriated by this. Suddenly, she let out a loud cry of pain and pretended to fall down. Alarmed, Duan Yu asked, "What's wrong?" He bent over her, extending a hand to help her up. Mu Wanqing leaned gently against his body. She hooked her left arm around his neck, then suddenly tightened her grip. She laughed. "Can you still run away from me now?" She slapped him once again with her right hand, this time on his left cheeks. The ringing sound was extremely sharp and clear.

Duan Yu was hurt, but only let out a single cry. "Ow!" Suddenly, he felt a warm stream rapidly rise up from his dantian. His blood vessels began to rapidly expand, filling him with an irresistibly sensual sensation. He suddenly was aware that the girl whom he had embraced within his bosom was delicately panting. Waves of fragrant scents filled the air, throwing his mind into great turmoil. He placed a kiss on her lips. Upon being kissed, Mu Wanqing's entire body immediately went soft. Duan Yu, still holding her body in his arms, set her down on top of the bed, then undid one of his buttons. Mu Wanqing said in a low voice, "But you...you are my elder brother..."

Although Duan Yu's mind was in turmoil, this sentence struck him like a thunderbolt out of the clear sky. Stunned

for a moment, he quickly released her and took three steps back. Attacking with both palms, he struck himself on his mouth four times. He cursed at himself. "I deserve to die. I deserve to die!"

Mu Wanqing saw that both of his eyes were bloodshot, and had a strange light in them. The flesh of his face was moving and churning, and his nostrils were dilating, then contracting. Frightened, she said, "Ah! Darling Duan, there was poison in the food! We have been deceived!" Duan Yu felt as though his entire body was boiling up, as though he had been placed within a steamer and was being thoroughly steamed. Upon hearing Mu Wanqing cry that the food was poisoned, he was actually relieved. "So it was poison which threw my mind into chaos and caused me to act in such a depraved way towards younger sister Wan. It isn't as though I was an insane creature who had never read the classical scriptures, acting in ways which imitate beasts."

But the heat coming from his body was truly hard to resist. Slowly, he removed one article of clothing after another, until he wore but a single shirt and trousers. He sat down on his knees. His eyes focused on his nose, and his nose pointed towards his heart. With a powerful effort, he restrained the capricious desires the drug was causing.

After consuming the Cinnabar Toad, he had become immune to all poisons. But the drug which had been put in the bowl of pork wasn't a poison which would actually harm a person's life. Rather, it was an aphrodisiac designed to generate lust. The desire for men and women to be together is inborn. This aphrodisiac only aroused the natural lusts which are innate to every person, intensifying them and making them difficult to control. The Cinnabar Toad's venom could, using the principle of 'fighting poison with poison', counteract thousands of toxin, but this aphrodisiac was not actually poisonous. Thus, the Cinnabar Toad could do nothing for Duan Yu.

Mu Wanqing was also feeling somewhat hot. After some time, it was more than she could bear, and she also removed her outer garments.

Duan Yu called out, "You can't take anything else off! Rest your back against the stone wall. It'll help cool you down."

Both of them leaned back against the stone walls. Although their backs were cool, every inch of their chest, stomach, limbs, face, and necks felt as though they were being rolling in fire. Duan Yu saw that Mu Wanqing's cheeks were a fiery red, and that she appeared unspeakably lovable and glamorous. Tears glimmered in her eyes, and it was obvious that she would like to do nothing better than to throw herself in his embrace. Duan Yu thought to himself, "At this moment, we need to be resolute in fighting off the effects of this drug. But our strength has limits. If we engaged in depraved, incestuous acts, we will have lost all face for the Duan family. Even a hundred deaths would not redeem such a heavy offense." He said, "Give me one of your poisoned quarrels."

Mu Wanqing asked, "For what?" Duan Yu said, "If...if I become unable to withstand the strength of this drug, I'll use the quarrel to stab myself to death, so I won't harm you." Mu Wanqing said, "I'm not giving it to you." Neither of them knew that the poison the quarrel could do nothing to Duan Yu. Duan Yu said, "You need to promise me something." Mu Wanqing said, "What?" Duan Yu said, "If I so much as extend my hand and touch your body, you must shoot your quarrels and kill me." Mu Wanqing said, "I refuse to promise you that." Duan Yu said, "I'm begging you. Promise me. The reputation of Dali's Duan dynasty, pure and clean for the past hundreds of years, cannot be ruined by my hand. Otherwise, how can I face my ancestors after death?"

Suddenly, a voice spoke from outside the stone room. "Dali's Duan dynasty used to be awe-inspiring in the past. But then the kingship passed into Duan Zhengming's hands.

His mouth is filled with righteousness and moral platitudes, but he has the heart of a wolf and the innards of a dog. He's long since lost the Duan dynasty's pure reputation!"

Duan Yu angrily replied, "Who are you? You're full of s.hit!" Mu Wanqing said in a low voice, "He's the freak in the green gown." Only to hear the man in green say, "Miss Mu, I promised that I'd help you turn your brother into your husband. I've taken this task to heart, and I will definitely accomplish it." Mu Wanqing angrily said, "You've poisoned the food to harm us! What does this have to do with my request?"

The man in green replied, "In that bowl of red-cooked pork, I placed a large quantity of the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder. After being ingested, if yin and yang do not enter into a harmonious relationship, and the male and female do not become man and wife, then their flesh and skin will crack and split. They will bleed from their seven orifices, then die. The potency of this 'Conjoining Powder' grows with every day. On the eighth day, even if you were the Great Golden Immortal Luo [a Taoist deity] himself, you still wouldn't be able to hold it off."

Duan Yu angrily replied, "There are neither enmities nor grievances between the two of us. Why did you cook up such a poisonous plot to harm me? You are trying to force me to lose all face as a man, and cause my parents and my uncle to suffer shame for the rest of their entire life. I...I would rather die a hundred times than engage in such a shameless, depraved, incestuous act!" The man in green replied, "Although neither enmities nor grievances exist between us, the grievances between your uncle and I are as deep as the oceans of the four seas. Duan Zhengming, Duan Zhengchun. I can imagine nothing better than for those two kids to lose all face and suffer lifelong shame, and be unable to face others in the future. Wonderful. Wonderful! Heh heh, heh heh." His lips could not move, so the sound of laughter

emanated from his larynx, sounding all the more hideous and strange.

Duan Yu was about to continue arguing, but, out of the corner of his eye, saw Mu Wanqing's beautiful face, which looked like the slumbering spring or a lovely cherry, and her slender body, which appeared as though it were a blooming hibiscus flower. His heart beat so frantically that even he was almost able to hear it. His brain was once more confused, and he thought to himself, "Little sister Wan and I originally had agreed to wed. If the two of us had not returned to Dali, who would have known that we were siblings? This is a karmic retribution born from the affairs of the heart of the previous generation. What does it have to do with the two of us?"

When his thought process arrived at this point, he shakily rose to his feet, only to see that Mu Wanqing, her hand supporting her against the wall, was also slowly rising to her feet. Suddenly, within his heart a sudden thought flashed by, striking upon it like a ray of sunlight on a flintstone. "Cannot! Cannot! Duan Yu, ah, Duan Yu! This is the critical moment, where your actions will determine if you are a man or a beast. If you make the wrong choice now, not only will you suffer a complete and utter fall from grace, but you will also destroy your uncle and your father as well."

He immediately cried out loudly, "Sister Wan! I am your elder brother, and you are my younger sister! You know that, right? Do you understand the Book of Changes?"

In the midst of her fuzzy-headedness, Mu Wanqing heard him ask such a strange question. "Huh? Book of Changes? I don't know what you're talking about." Duan Yu replied, "Alright, I'll teach you! The study of the Book of Changes is extremely difficult and abstruse. Listen carefully!" Mu Wanqing was confused. She asked, "What good is it going to do me?" Duan Yu replied, "After you learn it, it will benefit you greatly! Maybe the two of us can use it to escape from our current predicament."

He felt that his desires were driving him mad. At the critical juncture between being a man and a beast, a thousand things rested upon this one decision. If Mu Wanqing rushed over to him and tried to seduce him even but a little, his mental walls and willpower would surely crumble. The reason he wanted to teach her the Book of Changes was out of the hope that with one of them teaching, and the other learning, their attention would be focused somewhere else, and they wouldn't think about the affairs between males and females.

He said, "The basics of the Book of Changes rest in the Taiji, the Absolute Ultimate. From Taiji is born Liangyi [two mutually correlated opposites, aka Yin and Yang], and Liangyi gives birth to Sixiang [the four images]. In turn, the Sixiang gives birth to the Bagua [the eight divinatory Trigrams]. Do you know what the Bagua trigram looks like?" Mu Wanqing replied, "No, I don't. This is so annoying! My darling Duan, come over here. I have something I want to tell you."

Duan Yu said, "I'm your brother. Don't call me 'darling Duan'. Call me 'elder brother'. I'll tell you the secret mantra of the Bagua diagram. Concentrate and do your best to remember it. 'Qian' is three links, 'Kun' is six pieces, 'Zhen' stares at the cup, 'Gen' overflows the bowl. Within 'Li' is emptiness, within 'Kan' is fullness. Above 'Dui' is deficiency, below 'Xun' is absoluteness [the eight trigrams of the Bagua are 'Qian', 'Kun', 'Zhen', 'Gen', 'Li', 'Kan', 'Kuang', and 'Gen']."

Mu Wanqing repeated it after him once, then asked, "What's this 'cup' and 'water' and food bowl stuff all about? What are you talking about?" Duan Yu replied, "This is the shape of the Bagua diagram. You must understand the hidden meaning of the Bagua. All living things in the world, bar none, are encompassed by it. Let's use a family as an example. 'Qian' is the father, 'Kun' is the mother, 'Zhen' is the eldest son, 'Xun' is the eldest daughter. We're siblings,

so I would be the 'Zhen' trigram, and you would be the 'Xun' trigram...."

Mu Wanqing lazily said, "No. You are the 'Qian' trigram, and I am the 'Kun' trigram. We'll become husband and wife. Only in the future, when we have children, will the 'Zhen' trigram and the 'Xun' trigram appear." Duan Yu, hearing her speak so sluggishly yet flirtatiously, couldn't help but be moved. He quickly said, "Don't think crazy thoughts! Keep listening to me speak." Mu Wanqing replied, "If you...if you come sit next to me, I'll listen to you speak."

Only to hear the man in green say from outside the room, "Excellent. Excellent! After the two of you become husband and wife and give birth to sons and daughters, I will release you two. Not only will I not kill you, but I will teach you two all the martial arts I possess, and set you two to rampage across all the land under heaven."

Duan Yu angrily replied, "At the last hour, the two of us will kill ourselves by smashing our heads against the stone walls. The scions of Dali's Duan dynasty would rather die than be disgraced! You want to revenge yourself upon my body? Forget it!"

The man in green replied, "You dying is fine. You living is fine. I don't care. If you two choose the path of death instead, I will strip your bodies naked, removing every stitch of clothing. I'll write on your bodies that you two are the nephew and niece of Dali's Duan Zhengming, and Duan Zhengchun's children. I will write that while you two secretly had conjugal relations with each other, you were discovered by others, and that in your shame and anger, you committed suicide. I will preserve your bodies with salt, then hang your bodies up above Dali's main gate for three days. Then I will go to the city of Kaifeng, Luoyang, Lin'an, and Guangzhou and publicly expose your bodies there as well."

Duan Yu was absolutely livid. He loudly roared, "How exactly did my Duan family offend you, for you to retaliate in such a malicious way against us?"

The man in green replied, "Why should I discuss my own affairs with a little kid like you?"

After saying this, he fell silent. Duan Yu realized that every time he spoke with Mu Wanqing, he increased the danger of their situation by another degree. Turning, he sat facing the wall, and began to deeply ponder the secrets behind the 'Graceful Steps on the Waves'."

After pondering the dazzlingly complicated footwork for a long time, he suddenly thought to himself, "The dear Goddess in the stone cavern is ten times more beautiful than sister Wan. If I must marry, only by marrying that dear Goddess will I have not married in vain." In a dazed state, he turned his head, then saw Mu Wanqing's beautiful face slowly turn into that of the stone cavern's jade statue. Duan Yu shouted loudly, "Dearest Goddess! I'm suffering so miserably right now. Please come rescue me!" He knelt down on the spot and embraced Mu Wanqing's calf.

At this moment, a voice came from outside. "Time to eat!" A lit red candle was tossed in. The person laughed. "Quick, catch! It is your first night of spring-like lust in the marital chambers. How can there not be a flower-scented candle?" Startled, Duan Yu rose to his feet. By the glow of the candle, he saw Mu Wanqing's eyelashes ripple, beautiful beyond description. With a single breath he blew the candle out. He shouted back, "There's poison in the food. Take it away! We're not eating!"

That person replied, "You were poisoned long ago, and consumed a sufficiently large dose. There's no need to add more." Then he sent in the rice and the dishes.

Duan Yu accepted the food, placing it on the table. He thought to himself, "After a person dies, all comes to an end. With regards to issues that come up after his death, how can he possibly be concerned?" Then he had a second thought. "Father, mother, and my uncle have loved me so dearly. How can I allow the Duan family to be laughed at by the world?" Suddenly, he heard Mu Wanqing gently say, "My darling

Duan, I am going to commit suicide with my poisoned quarrels, so I won't end up harming you." Duan Yu shouted, "Wait! Even after the two of us, brother and sister, die, this evil man will not be done with us. This man is vicious and dangerous. Compared to the baby-murdering Ye Erniang or the heart-ripping Divine Crocodile, he's even more evil! Who can this man possibly be?"

Only to hear that man in a green gown say in a low voice, "Kid, you have some experience after all. This old man is the chief of the Four Great Evils. I am known as 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity!'"

Translator's thoughts:

- 1) Wow, Jinyong and his history lessons...
- 2) Duan Yu is such a dork of a bookworm! His idea to get rid of sexual tension/lust...is to study literature? Wtf? Wow!
- 3) Duan Yu has some serious self-control. This is actually one of the few points in the novel where I very much admire him. If you were in his shoes, what would you do? Readers, what are your thoughts?
- 4) I translated '□□□□' as 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity'; Chinese readers, what do you think? A more accurate translation might be 'overflowing with evil', but I couldn't think of a good way to get it in the 'four word format', with the character '□', 'evil', being the first character. I think I capture most of the essence of the sobriquet; what do you all think?

Chapter 8: Hiss of the Tiger, Moan of the Dragon

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

Within the warm pavilion of the South-Subduing Palace, the Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment Gao Shengtai, returned and reported that Zhong Wanchou, his wife, and Qin Hongmian had departed the palace grounds. The South-Subduing Princess Dao Baifeng, concerned about her son, said, “Emperor, do you know the location of the so-called Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge?” Duan Zhengming, also known as the Emperor Baoding, replied, “Today isn’t the first time that I’ve heard of this place. But up until now, it has had no interactions with Dali”.

Dao Baifeng worriedly said, “From what Zhong Wanchou said, it seems this place is very remote and hidden. I’m worried we might not be able to find it. If Yu’er remains in enemy hands for too long...” Emperor Baoding let out a small smile. “Yu’er has been sheltered all his life. He doesn’t understand how dangerous and sinister the world can be. For him to undergo some hardships and gain some endurance and experience may not necessarily be an altogether bad thing.” Dao Baifeng’s mind was filled with anxiety, but she did not dare rebut him.

Emperor Baoding said to Duan Zhengchun, “Little brother Chun, could I trouble you to have some wine and dishes brought out?” Duan Zhengchun said, “Yes!” He sent the orders, and in a short amount of time an entire banquet was prepared with all sorts of exotic delicacies. Emperor Baoding ordered everyone present to partake of the banquet, feasting and drinking.

Dali was a small, rustic nation of the south where hundreds of minorities lived. The Han people were not

necessarily in the majority. The South-Subduing Princess, Dao Baifeng, was herself of the Baiyi tribe. The people of the country accepted the teachings of the central plains as profound, but even the daily rituals of the imperial court were much more casual and simpler than that of the far away Song dynasty. In addition, Emperor Baoding had a very compassionate, gentle character. Aside from when he was visiting monasteries or temples, he never liked to stand on ceremony. Thus Duan Zhengchun, his wife, and Gao Shengtai sat next to him at the head of the table and kept him company.

While eating and drinking, Emperor Baoding refused to bring up the previous matter. Dao Baifeng's eyebrows were tightly knit with worry. To her, the food had no taste at all. At dawnbreak, the guards outside said, "Minister Ba has come to pay his respects to the Emperor." Duan Zhengming said, "Enter!" The curtain screen was parted, and a short, skinny black man entered. He knelt before Emperor Baoding and said, "Reporting to your majesty, to arrive at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, one must first pass the 'Benevolent Man's Crossing', then go through the 'Iron Rope Bridge'. To enter the gorge itself, one needs to pass through a hole in a gigantic tree."

Dao Baifeng clapped her hands and laughed. "If I had known that Minister Ba had been sent out, why would I possibly have worried about being unable to locate the enemy's lair? I wouldn't have had to be worried for so long either!" That black man bowed slightly and said, "Princess, you flatter me. Ba Tianshi is embarrassed and not deserving of such praise."

Although the skinny black man, Ba Tianshi, had a rustic appearance, he was an extremely intelligent and capable person. He had gained great merit from accomplishing many tasks for Emperor Baoding. Presently, his position was that of the 'Sikong', Minister of Soil and Water. The three ministerial positions of 'Situ', Minister of Education, 'Sima',

Minister of War, and 'Sikong', Minister of Soil and Water, were the foremost positions in the imperial court, of exceeding glory and honor. Ba Tianshi's martial arts were absolutely outstanding, and he was an expert in qinggong. This time, he had been sent out by Emperor Baoding's decree to locate and investigate the enemy's base of operations. He secretly followed behind Zhong Wanchou's party and actually managed to find the location of the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge.

Emperor Baoding smiled a little. "Tianshi, sit down and eat your fill. Then we'll go together." Ba Tianshi knew that the Emperor hated when others acted too worshipfully or formally towards him, and that he loved and addressed his subjects and his officials as though they were his brothers or friends. If he acted too formally or respectfully towards the Emperor, he might actually cause the Emperor to be angry with him. He immediately assented.

Lifting up his rice bowl, he began to eat. He didn't touch a single drop of wine, but the quantity of food he ate was astonishing. In a twinkling of an eye he consumed eight large bowlfuls of food. Duan Zhengchun, Gao Shengtai, and himself had known each other for a long time, and so the other two weren't surprised at all. After Ba Tianshi had finished eating, he stood up and wiped away the grease from his lips. "Your vassal, Ba Tianshi, will lead the way."

He left, taking the position of vanguard. Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun, his wife, and Gao Shengtai followed behind him. After leaving the South-Subduing Palace, they found the Four Imperial Guards, Chu, Gu, Fu, and Zhu standing outside the door, waiting for them with horses already prepared. Dozens of swordsmen who had sworn to follow Emperor Baoding were there as well.

Before founding their country, the Duan family was originally part of the wulin of the central plains. In the past hundreds of years, their descendants had never lost the customs and manners of their ancestors. Although the two

brothers Duan Zhengmin and Duan Zhengchun had boundless riches, they often strolled about incognito in plain clothes. If any members of the wulin community came to visit or to carry out a vendetta against them, they always treated the visitors according to the rules of the wulin, never putting on imperial airs.

Thus, everyone present was long since used to the sight of Emperor Baoding was personally leading an expedition, and weren't startled. From Emperor Baoding on down, everyone changed into ordinary clothes. They no longer appeared like gentry, dressed in fine red silks, but rather just a group of ordinary people roaming about.

Dao Baifeng saw that out of the people whom Ba Tianshi had selected, twenty or so of them were carrying large hatchets and long saws. Laughing, she asked, "Minister Ba, are we disguising ourselves as carpenters on our way to building a large house?" Ba Tianshi replied, "We're sawing down trees and tearing apart houses!"

The party were riding on fine stallions, and thus moved like the wind. They arrived at the forest outside the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge before noon. Ba Tianshi ordered his men to chop down the obstructing trees one at a time. Arriving at the mouth of the gorge, Emperor Baoding pointed at the large tree upon which was painted the words, "Any person surnamed Duan who enters this gorge shall be mercilessly killed." He laughed. "What a great enmity the master of the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge has with our family!"

But Duan Zhengchun knew that Zhong Wanchou was afraid that he would enter the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge to seek out Gan Baobao. He glanced at his wife out of the corner of his eye, and saw that she only smiled coldly.

Four men carrying large hatchets rushed over to that large tree. In a short period of time, that large tree, with a trunk so wide that many people would be needed to wrap their arms around it, was felled.

Ba Tianshi ordered everyone present to wait with their horses at the mouth of the gorge.

The Four Imperial Guards, Chu, Gu, Fu, and Zhu led the way. Behind them were Ba Tianshi and Gao Shengtai. Following them was the South-Subduing Prince and Princess. Last of all was Emperor Baoding. Upon entering the gorge, they noticed that everything was quiet and still. No one came to greet them. According to the rules of the jianghu, Ba Tianshi, holding the name placards of the two brothers Duan Zhengming and Duan Zhengchun, strode boldly forth and made his way to the front of the main house. In a clear voice, he said, "The two brothers of Dali's Duan dynasty have come to pay a visit to the gorge-master Zhong!"

Just as the sound of his voice was dying away, a long shadow suddenly appeared from the trees to the left. It rushed towards Ba Tianshi with rapid speed, extending his hand and snatching at the two name placards in Ba Tianshi's hands. Ba Tianshi retreated three steps to the right and shouted, "Who are you, honored sir?" It was none other than 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil', Yun Zhonghe! His first snatching attempt having missed, he sped up even more, once more pouncing towards Ba Tianshi.

Ba Tianshi saw that his qinggong was exceptionally formidable and wanted to compete with him a bit. He immediately rushed forward three more steps, and Yun Zhonghe pursued for three steps. With a kick of his feet, Ba Tianshi began to run quickly, with Yun Zhonghe chasing directly after him. A short man, pursued by a tall man. In the blink of an eye, they had circled the room three times. Yun Zhonghe's stride was unnaturally long, but Ba Tianshi kept jumping and leaping about. The rise and fall of his footsteps were much quicker than that of Yun Zhonghe. Throughout the race, a distance of a few meters was maintained between the two. Yun Zhonghe knew that he would not be able to catch up, but Ba Tianshi, in turn, knew he wouldn't be able to shake him off. Both of them had long fancied

themselves as having the best qinggong in the world. At this moment, upon meeting such a formidable opponent, both of them were secretly startled. Their movements became faster and faster. The lapels of their clothes fluttered in the wind, releasing a series of 'hu' sounds. Although there were only two people chasing after each other, from an outsider's perspective, it looked as though five or six people were running around in a circle. As the contest continued and as the distance between their two bodies grew slightly, it turned into a circular race around the room. No one could tell if Yun Zhonghe was chasing Ba Tianshi, or if Ba Tianshi was chasing Yun Zhonghe. If Ba Tianshi managed to catch up to Yun Zhonghe, then he naturally would have won this qinggong competition. But with a burst of strength, Yun Zhonghe once more increased the distance between himself and Ba Tianshi.

But suddenly, the main door opened with a cracking sound, and Zhong Wanchou walked out. Ba Tianshi did not stop. Secretly generating his internal energy, he shot out with his left hand. The name placards smoothly flew towards Zhong Wanchou.

Extending his hand, Zhong Wanchou received the placards. He roared, "You! The one surnamed Duan! Since you have come to visit me in accordance with the rules of the jianghu, why did you destroy the trees that served as my gate?"

Chu Wanli called back, "How could a person of the Emperor's stature lower himself to tunnel his way through the hole in that tree?"

Dao Baifeng was worried for her beloved son the entire time. She couldn't help but call out, "Where's my son? Have you hidden him here?" Suddenly, a sharp female voice came out from the room. "You came a bit late. We've already ripped apart the stomach and torn the chest of that kid surnamed Duan, and fed his body to the dogs!" This woman gripped a blade in each hand. The blades were as thin as a

willow leaf and gleamed with a blue light. It was the deadly Asura Sabres, which would quickly take the life of any person whose blood it tasted!

Eighteen years ago, these two women hated and were jealous of each other, laying down a deep enmity and a strong feud. Dao Baifeng knew that Qin Hongmian was lying, but upon hearing her claim that her beloved only son had died in such a miserable fashion, felt the flames of her old hatred rise and stir anew. She coldly replied, "My question was directed towards gorge-master Zhong. No one will speak with such a cheap s.lut as yourself, to avoid lowering their own dignity!"

Suddenly, with two 'dang' sounds, Qin Hongmian struck out with her twin sabres, her attack coming as fast as the wind. This attack, the 'Character Ten Chop' [the Chinese character for 'ten' is a cross, so this would be a cross chop], was her finest skill with which she had become famous in former days. No one knows how many heroes had died under this venomous stance of her Asura sabres. Dao Baifeng pulled out her flywhisk and hurriedly moved backwards, spinning around as she did so and sending the tail of her flywhisk towards Qin Hongmian's heart.

Duan Zhengchun felt extremely awkward and conflicted. One was his current beloved wife; the other was his former sweetheart. His love towards Dao Baifeng was truly deep and profound, but was also unable to forget what he and Qin Hongmian had once shared. He knew that if the two women started fighting, they would be using vicious, life-taking techniques. No matter who was harmed, he would have hated the outcome. He called out, "Stay your hand!" Slanting his body, he quickly moved closer, pulling out his sword and trying to separate the two women.

As soon as Zhong Wanchou saw Duan Zhengchun, his belly had filled with anger. With a clattering sound, he pulled out his large ringed sabre and chopped towards him. Chu Wanli called out, "Prince, no need to personally deal

with this. I'll take care of him!" Striking out with his iron staff, he attacked Zhong Wanchou's neck. His previous iron staff had been broken in two by Ye Erniang, so he had ordered a new one to be forged.

Zhong Wanchou cursed at him. "I always knew that the one surnamed Duan only knew how to rely on winning via superior numbers!" Duan Zhengchun laughed. "Wanli, stand down. I was just about to test out gorge-master Zhong's martial arts!" His long sword struck out, deflecting Chu Wanli's iron staff. At the same time, he dragged his sword down the back of Zhong Wanchou's large-ringed sabre, nicking his fingers. In one stroke, he 'deflected,' 'dragged down', and 'nicked', not revealing even half of a flaw or opening. Zhong Wanchou was startled. "What a formidable sword skill this thief surnamed Duan has!" He immediately clamped down his anger. In front of such a powerful opponent, he dared not be careless or reckless.

Duan Zhengchun's straight sword continued to attack. Zhong Wanchou saw that the power in his attack was lively and powerful, difficult for him to block. He leapt three steps backwards. Duan Zhengchun had only wanted him to stop intervening, and with him gone, moved sideways to stand next to Dao Baifeng and Qin Hongmian. Qin Hongmian's sabre techniques were becoming slightly disorganized, and Dao Baifeng kept advancing and pressing onwards. With a series of 'chi' sounds, Qin Hongmian suddenly shot out three poisoned quarrels. Her quarrels were identical to those shot out by Mu Wanqing, but her skill in shooting them out was much higher.

These quarrels were aimed to three parts of Dao Baifeng's body; the left, the right, and the center. This was an extremely difficult attack to dodge. Dao Baifeng leapt into the air and all three quarrels passed by underneath her feet. But just as her body was in mid-air, three more quarrels were shot out. The first was aimed at her abdomen. The second was aimed between her two legs. The third was aimed at her

foot. At the moment, Dao Baifeng was unable to ascend any higher, and as her body descended, these three quarrels were perfectly positioned to strike at her head, chest, and stomach. This attack was vicious to the extreme.

Fear filled Dao Baifeng's heart and she attacked hurriedly with her flywhisk, managing to deflect the first poisoned quarrel. Her body was descending rapidly, and it seemed as though the second and third quarrels, aimed at her chest and stomach, would be impossible for her to dodge or deflect. Suddenly, a white light flashed, and the hilt of a long sword flashed by her face, chopping these two poisoned quarrels into four pieces. At the same time, someone placed his own body protectively in front of hers. It was Duan Zhengchun who had rushed over and saved her life. If he had been even slightly slower and been unable to chop the quarrels in half, then they would have struck his own body instead.

Upon seeing those, both Dao Baifeng and Qin Hongmian were so terrified that their faces turned pale, and their hearts thumped frantically. Dao Baifeng called out, "I don't want your help!" She sidestepped past her husband, striking towards Qin Hongmian with her flywhisk. She despised the venomous, cruel techniques which Qin Hongmian employed, and her flywhisk attacked with extreme speed. It swept towards Qin Hongmian, preventing her from using those poisoned quarrels again. Moments ago, Qin Hongmian had almost hit Duan Zhengchun with those poisoned quarrels and saw him protect his wife's body without a care for his own life, showing extreme bias in this fight. In her heart, panic had intermingled with bitter misery, and for the moment she was unable to block the attack of the flywhisk.

Dao Baifeng's flywhisk technique, "Phoenix Alights on the Parasol Tree", descended towards the crown of her head. Qin Hongmian hurriedly dodged to the right, just as Dao Baifeng struck out with her left palm in that direction. It seemed as though she was about to be struck right on the pit of her

stomach and suffer a severe enough injury that she would vomit blood. The palm was only inches away from her abdomen, but suddenly a male palm appeared and blocked, diverting Dao Baifeng's palm. It was Duan Zhengchun who had saved her. He said, "Dearest phoenix, don't be so fierce against her."

Qin Hongmian was startled, then angrily replied, "What's with the 'dearest phoenix', 'beloved peacock' crap? You're so affectionate towards her!" Her left sabre chopped towards Duan Zhengchun's neck. Dao Baifeng was also furious at her husband rescuing his former mistress. She withdrew her attacking flywhisk, redirecting it and sending it sweeping towards Duan Zhengchun's face.

The two women struck at the same time, and saw each other's attack at the same time as well. They simultaneously cried out, "Oh no!" Both of them wanted to protect their lover. Dao Baifeng's flywhisk changed direction once again to block the Asura sabre; Qin Hongmian, on the other hand, sent out a flying kick towards Dao Baifeng, wanting to force her to retract the flywhisk.

Duan Zhengchun slanted his body to dodge, but with a 'peng' sound, Qin Hongmian's kick landed on his buttocks. Dao Baifeng angrily said, "Why are you kicking my husband?" Qin Hongmian said, "My darling Duan, I didn't do that on purpose! You...are you hurt?" Duan Zhengchun decided to put on an act, and loudly cried, "Ouch! Ouch!! You kicked me to death!" He squatted down.

Zhong Wanchou, seeing the situation, thought to seize the advantage and raised his sabre to hack at Duan Zhengchun. Dao Baifeng called out, "Stay your hand!" Qin Hongmian cried out, "Hit him!" The flywhisk and the Asura sabres struck out at Zhong Wanchou simultaneously, forcing him to retract his strike to defend against them. He loudly shouted out, "The stinking thief surnamed Duan! You useless pretty boy, you're relying on women to save your life! What type of hero are you?" Duan Zhengchun burst out into loud

laughter. He suddenly leapt up, and with three 'shua' sounds, sent out three sword attacks that forced Zhong Wanchou to stumble and stagger backwards.

Qin Hongmian was startled, then angrily called out, "You aren't injured at all! You were faking it!" Dao Baifeng was also angry. "This bastard excels at scamming others. How could you have believed him?" Qin Hongmian cried out, "Beware my sabres!" Dao Baifeng also cried out, "Hit him!" The two women joined together to attack Duan Zhengchun.

Emperor Baoding, seeing his brother getting entangled in the dispute with the two women, turned his head away and laughed secretly. He said to Chu Wanli, "Go inside and check the place out." Chu Wanli replied, "Yes sir!"

The Four Imperial Guardians Chu, Gu, Fu, and Zhu rushed into the room. Right as Gu Ducheng's left foot crossed over the threshold, he felt a cold wind rush towards the crown of his skull. Before his left foot had touched the floor, his right foot had already leapt backwards. He saw an extremely thin but broad sabre slice downwards in front of his face. The distance between him and the blade was but a few inches. If he had been but a moment slower to dodge, even if he had lucked out and his head wasn't split in twain, his nose would have been sliced off at the very least. Cold sweat trickled down his back. He saw that the hidden figure was a middle aged woman with elegant features. It was 'No Evil Left Undone', Ye Erniang. Her thin sabre was rectangular in shape. In all four directions, the blade was surpassingly sharp. Holding on to the short sabre-handle, she brandished it about, forming a circular halo about her.

Gu Ducheng was extremely startled at first. After calming himself, he let out a loud cry, then with a wave of his broad axe, chopped towards her thin blade. Ye Erniang's thin sabre continually spun around, not daring to directly meet such a heavy weapon as an axe. Gu Ducheng executed the seventy two strokes of his "Chaotic Whirlwind Hatchet" technique, his twin axes chopping upwards and downwards towards her.

Ye Erniang was possessed of a weird temperament, and alternated between gently cooing towards Gu Ducheng and speaking boldly towards him. Zhu Dancheng, seeing how leisurely she fought and how strange her sabre techniques were, conjectured that if the battle went on for too long, Gu Ducheng wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. Immediately, he struck out with his twin judge's pens in a pincer attack towards her.

At this time, Ba Tianshi and Yun Zhonghe were still happily running around in circles. Their qinggong abilities were on par, and it would take a long time before victory or defeat could be determined. At this time, what they were really competing in was the relative superiority of their internal energy. After having ran over a hundred circles, Ba Tianshi knew that although Yun Zhonghe's skill in his lower legs was abundant and graceful, he was unable to center himself perfectly. In this respect, Yun Zhonghe was inferior to his own movements, with its elegant and perfectly executed leaps and bounds which had no left-over energy. All he had to do was to come to a sudden halt and strike with three palms, and Yun Zhonghe surely would not be able to take it. But Ba Tianshi was determined to defeat Yun Zhonghe solely through superior qinggong, and not through superior fighting ability. Thus, he continued to run with all his might.

Suddenly, a coarse voice let fly a stream of curses. "Goddamnit, you guys are kicking up such a racket that your old man here can't even sleep. What type of rabbit whelp has come?" The Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas suddenly appeared, Crocodile Maw Scissors in hand, as he leapt closer and closer.

Fu Sigui called out, "Your master's father has come!" The Divine Crocodile yelled back, "What are you talking about, 'my master's father'?" Fu Sigui pointed towards Duan Zhengchun. "The South-Subduing Prince is the father of young lord Duan. Young lord Duan is your master. Are you trying to deny it?" Although the Divine Crocodile had done

many vile things, he had one good quality. He never reneged on anything he said or agreed to. Upon hearing these words, he was so angry that his face turned bright yellow, but couldn't deny them. He angrily replied, "What ****ing business is it of yours, you son of a turtle, with regards to what goes on between me and my master?" Fu Sigui laughed. "I'm not your son. Why are you calling me the son of a turtle?"

The Divine Crocodile was confused. Only after a long moment had passed did he realize that the other person had insulted him and called him a turtle in a roundabout way. After coming to this realization, with a series of loud 'wa' cries, he repeatedly opened then chomped closed the two sides of his Crocodile Maw Scissors, then attacked Fu Sigui. He was a dim-witted person, but truly capable in martial arts. The Crocodile Maw Scissors were filled with a forest of white 'teeth', similar to the sharp needles on top of a wolf's fang cudgel. Fu Sigui received three of his attacks using his copper truncheon, and already felt his two arms turn sore. Chu Wanli waved his long pole, flourishing the soft steel-wire whip attached to the top of the pole and attacking the face of the Divine Crocodile. The Divine Crocodile drew his Crocodile's Tail Whip and blocked the attack.

Watching the battle scene, Emperor Baoding felt that none of his people were in any real danger. He said to Gao Shengtai, "Stay here and watch over things."

Gao Shengtai replied, "Yes sir!" He stepped aside.

Emperor Baoding entered the room and called out, "Yu'er! Are you here?" But no one responded. He opened the door to a side-room and called out again. "Yu'er! Yu'er!" Only to see a fifteen or sixteen year old girl come out from behind the door and ask, "You...who are you?" Emperor Baoding replied, "Where is Duan Yu?" The girl replied, "Why are you looking for him?" Emperor Baoding replied, "I'm going to rescue him."

The girl shook her head. "You won't be able to rescue him. He's been locked inside a stone house, and sealed in with a large boulder. Someone is guarding him too." Emperor Baoding replied, "Take me to him. I'll knock down the guard and push aside the boulder. Then I'll rescue him." The girl shook her head again. "I can't! If I took you there, my daddy will kill me." Emperor Baoding asked, "Who is your father?" The girl replied, "My surname is Zhong. My daddy is the master of this gorge." The girl was Zhong Ling, who had escaped from Mt. Wuliang.

Emperor Baoding nodded. He thought that for such a little girl, using words to threaten her or martial arts to force her to reveal the secret would be degrading to his stature and position. Since Duan Yu was definitely in the gorge, it wouldn't be too hard to locate him. He immediately exited the room, intending to find someone else to take him to Duan Yu.

Inside the stone room, upon hearing that the freak in green was actually the most vile man in the world, he who was known as 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity', Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing were terrified. In their shared fright, they rushed over and embraced each other. Duan Yu said in a low voice, "So we fell into the hands of 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity', the most evil man in the entire world. This is really, really bad." With a 'wu' sound, Mu Wanqing rested her head against his chest. Duan Yu gently stroked her hair. He consoled her, "Don't be afraid."

Both of their clothes were moist with sweat, as though they had just climbed out of a pool of water. Their bodies were burning hot, as though filled with steam. Smelling each other's breath, they were even more attracted towards each other. One was a healthy and vigorous male youth; the other was a young woman filled with deep love. Even if they hadn't been excited by the aphrodisiac, it would be difficult for them to control themselves. Much less now, having eaten the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining Powder', which had an

abnormally powerful effect and possessed a despotic might. It was enough to turn an honorable scholar into a lewd lowlife, a chaste woman into a prostitute. It bewildered minds, turning even virtuous sages into beasts. At this moment, everything depended on one thing remaining bright in Duan Yu's mind; the pure and honorable reputation of the Duan dynasty. Only this allowed him to restrain himself.

The man in green was extremely pleased. His strange voice laughed. "You two, brother and sister! Hurry up and become husband and wife. The sooner you two have a baby, the sooner you will escape your imprisonment. I'm leaving!" After speaking, he leapt over the tree wall.

Duan Yu yelled loudly, "Yue Number Three! Yue Number Three! Your master is in trouble! Hurry up and help out!" He called out for a long time, but how could there be any response?

Duan Yu thought to himself, "We're in such a critical state. I can't even accept him as my master now, even if I wanted to. If I had made a wrong choice and accepted an evil man as my master, that would only be my personal business. I wouldn't have implicated my uncle and my father in this." Following this train of thought, he loudly shouted, "Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas! I'm willing to accept you as my master now! I'm willing to be the heir of the Southern Seas sect! Quick, come and rescue your apprentice! If I die, you won't have a student anymore!"

He wildly shouted and cried out for a time, but never heard the Divine Crocodile's voice. He suddenly thought to himself, "Oh no! Not good! The one person whom the Divine Crocodile fears the most is his superior, the most evil person in the world, 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity'. Even if he heard me shouting, he wouldn't dare to come rescue us." His heart was filled with pure bitterness.

Mu Wanqing softly said, "My darling Duan, after we become husband and wife, do you want for our first baby to

be a boy or a girl?" Duan Yu replied, in a dazed voice, "A boy!"

Suddenly, the sound of a female voice drifted in from outside the stone house. "Mr. Duan, you're her big brother! You definitely can't marry her!" Duan Yu was startled. "You...are you Miss Zhong?" That girl was indeed Zhong Ling. "Yes, it's me! I eavesdropped on what that evil man in green said. I'll definitely find a way to rescue you and Miss Mu!" Duan Yu was ecstatic. "That's great! Quick, find and steal the antidote to the poison for me!" Mu Wanqing angrily shouted, "Zhong Ling! You little devil, scram! Who wants you to save us?" Zhong Ling said, "It'd be best if I first thought of some way to push this boulder away and rescued you two." Duan Yu replied, "No, no! You go find the antidote. I...I can't hold on much longer. I'm...I'm about to die." Frightened, Zhong Ling cried, "What's wrong? What do you mean you can't hold on much longer? Does your tummy hurt?" Duan Yu replied, "It isn't my stomach that hurts." Zhong Ling asked again, "Is it your head that hurts?" Duan Yu replied, "That isn't it either." Zhong Ling asked, "So where exactly do you feel uncomfortable?!"

Duan Yu was filled with uncontrollable lust. How could he possibly explain this to the little girl? He only replied, "My entire body is uncomfortable. Just think of a way to steal the antidote for me." Zhong Ling wrinkled her forehead. "If you can't tell me the symptoms, I won't be able to find the antidote for you. My father has lots of antidotes, but I need to know if it is your stomach that hurts, your head that hurts, or your heart that hurts." Duan Yu let out a sigh. "I'm not hurting, precisely. I just...I was poisoned by something called the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder." Zhong Ling clapped her hands. "Since you know the name of the poison, it'll be no problem at all. Big brother Duan, I'll go and get the antidote from my daddy right now!"

She hurriedly climbed over the tree wall, intending to go find her parents and convince them into giving her the

antidote for the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder. The 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder actually belonged to the man in the green, but as soon as Zhong Wanchou heard the name of it, he knew what type of thing it had to be. His horse-like face stretching in disapproval, he said, "Little girl, why are you asking about such inappropriate things? If you keep on talking such rubbish, I'll grab you by the ear and give you a spanking." Zhong Ling hurriedly replied, "I'm not talking rubbish."

Just then, Emperor Baoding and the rest of the party had entered the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. Zhong Wanchou had hurriedly rushed out to confront the enemies, leaving Zhong Ling by herself in the room. She heard the sounds of a ferocious fight brewing outside, with weapons clashing, but ignored them. She focused her energies on rummaging through her father's secret medicine cabinet. Zhong Wanchou had over a hundred medicine bottles with the names of the medicine written on them, but none of them were the antidote for the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder. She had no idea what to do. Suddenly, she heard someone entering the house. Exiting the room to see who it was, she had run into Emperor Baoding.

Emperor Baoding looked for someone to lead him to Duan Yu, but couldn't find anyone at all. Suddenly, he heard someone running towards him from behind. Turning his head, he saw Zhong Ling rushing towards him. He immediately stopped and waited for her. Zhong Ling ran towards him and said, "I couldn't find the antidote! I guess it'll be best to take you there. I wonder if you can push the boulder aside." Emperor Baoding was baffled. "Antidote? Boulder?" Zhong Ling said, "Just follow me. As soon as you see everything, you'll understand."

Although the pathways within the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge were complex and winding, with Zhong Ling leading the way, Emperor Baoding arrived at the tree wall in a matter of moments. Emperor Baoding grasped

Zhong Ling's arm. His body did not jump or flex, but suddenly levitated into the sky, smoothly and steadily flying past the tree wall. Zhong Ling clapped her hands excitedly. "Wonderful, wonderful! You fly so wonderfully! Wait! Oh no!"

Someone was in front of the stone house. It was the man in green!

Zhong Ling was absolutely terrified of this half-dead, half-living person. She whispered, "Hurry, let's leave. We'll come back after this person has left." Upon seeing this freak, Emperor Baoding was also extremely astonished. He comforted Zhong Ling. "With me here, you don't need to be afraid. Duan Yu is inside this stone house, right?" Hiding behind him, Zhong Ling nodded.

Emperor Baoding casually strolled forward. "Honored sir, please step aside." But the man in green seemed to have neither heard nor saw him, sitting there unmoving.

Emperor Baoding said, "Honored sir, if you refuse to move, then please do not blame me for offending you!" Leaning sideways, he flashed past the man in green from the left. Slanting his right palm, he pressed it against the side of the boulder. Just as he was about to exert his energy to push it aside, he saw the man in green take out a thin steel cane and point it at his 'Quepen' acupoint. When the steel cane reached within a foot of his body, it came to a halt, then began to quiver. If Emperor Baoding exerted any energy on the boulder, the steel cane would immediately attack, and he would be unable to dodge it at all.

Emperor Baoding's heart was filled with cold fear. He thought to himself, "This man's acupoint sealing technique is extremely brilliant. Who can he be?" His right palm fluttered slightly, then chopped towards the steel cane. His left palm snaked underneath his right palm, resting itself against the boulder once more. The man in green shifted the position of his steel cane. It was now pointing at his 'Tianchi' acupoint. Emperor Baoding's palm moved as swiftly as the wind, shifting positions seven times. But each time, the man

in green would simply move his cane to point at a different acupoint, adapting to the situation.

The two exchanged many stances. Each time, the man in green's threatened attack would prevent Emperor Baoding from exerting any energy to pushing the stone aside. His knowledge of the various acupoints on a person's body was extremely accurate. Emperor Baoding felt that it was on par with his own, and above that of his brother, Duan Zhengchun. Suddenly, he turned his palm into a finger, and with a 'chi' sound, exercised the power of his 'Solitary Solar Finger'. He pointed at the steel cane. If his attack managed to connect with it, the cane would definitely be bent and warped. But suddenly, a 'chi' sound came from the cane as well as it pointed back. Their energy streams met in the middle of the air. Emperor Baoding moved one step back while the man in green's body trembled. A red light flashed across Emperor Baoding's face. At the same time, a faint layer of even distributed blue light appeared on the man in green's face as well.

Emperor Baoding was astounded. He thought to himself, "Not only is this man's martial arts extremely high, but he definitely must have some sort of past relationship with me. His cane technique is clearly related to the 'Solitary Solar Finger.' Immediately, he cupped his hands towards him. "Senior, what is your respected name? I hope you can tell me." Only to hear a voice sound out. "Are you Duan Zhengming, or Duan Zhengchun." Emperor Baoding saw that he was able to speak without his lips moving and was all the more flabbergasted. He replied, "I am Duan Zhengming." The man in green let out a 'hng' of contempt. "So you are the current Baoding emperor of the country of Dali?" Emperor Baoding replied, "Exactly so." The man in green asked, "How does your martial arts compare with mine? Who is superior, who is inferior?"

Emperor Baoding hesitated for a long moment, then said, "In martial arts, you are slightly better than me. But if the

two of us are really to fight, I can defeat you.” The man in green replied, “Correct. After all, my body is crippled. Sigh! I would never have thought that after becoming an emperor, you would have continued to practice martial arts so assiduously and not slack off in the slightest.” Although the voice which emanated from his abdomen was extremely strange, one could still discern a sense of anger and despair.

Unable to guess the origins of this person, countless questions flooded into Emperor Baoding’s heart. Suddenly, he heard an urgent cry from inside the room. It was Duan Yu’s voice. Emperor Baoding called out, “Yu’er! Are you alright? Don’t panic, I’ve come to rescue you!” Zhong Ling cried out in fear, “Mr. Duan! Mr. Duan!”

Duan Yu and Mu Wanqing were suffering the powerful effects of the aphrodisiac. It was become harder and harder to resist their lustful desires. As time passed, Mu Wanqing had become so dazed that she had long-since forgotten that Duan Yu was her elder brother. She cried out, “My darling Duan, hold me. Hug me.” She was a virgin, and thus had only a smattering of knowledge with regards to conjugal relations between men and women. All she knew was that her body felt so very dry and hot, and that only Duan Yu holding her would make her feel better. She threw herself at Duan Yu. Duan Yu cried out, “I can’t do that!” He dodged sideways, his feet unconsciously moving in the pattern of the ‘Graceful Steps Upon the Waves’. Mu Wanqing, having missed her mark, fell onto the bed and fainted.

Duan Yu walked a few more steps, and his internal energy automatically began to flow along his meridians. He walked faster and faster. An incredible suffocating feeling welled up in his stomach, making him feel as though he could hardly breathe. He couldn’t help but let out a loud cry. Suddenly, the feeling of suffocation diminished. He immediately walked a few more steps, then let out another cry. The feeling of lust diminished a bit. He heard but ignored the conversation between Emperor Baoding and the man in

green, as well as Emperor Baoding's exhortations to him to not panic.

The man in green said, "This kid's self control is not bad. After taking my 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder, he can actually hold out for so long." Emperor Baoding was startled. "What type of poison is that?" The man in green replied, "It isn't poison. It's just a very strong type of aphrodisiac." Emperor Baoding asked, "What are your intentions, for you to feed him something like that?" The man in green replied, "Inside the room, there is a female as well. His sister!"

As soon as Emperor Baoding heard this, he immediately understood this person's treacherous plot. Even if his level of self-cultivation were much higher, he wouldn't have been able to control the huge surge of anger he felt. Waving his sleeves, with a 'chi' sound he struck out with a finger towards the man in green. The man in green blocked that attack with his steel cane. Emperor Baoding struck again with a second finger, this one aimed at his 'Qitu' acupoint, right beneath his larynx. That was a fatal acupoint, and he expected the man in green to fiercely defend and counterattack.

Who would have thought that the man in green only let out two cold chuckles. He neither defended nor dodged. Emperor Baoding, seeing him ignore the attack, felt the situation was extremely strange and retracted his attack. He asked, "Why are you willing to die?" The man in green replied, "It couldn't be better if I died under your hands. Your sins will become yet another level deeper." Emperor Baoding asked, "Who are you?" The man in green whispered a single sentence.

Upon hearing that sentence, the color of Emperor Baoding's face changed. He said, "I don't believe you!" The man in green switched the steel cane in his right hand to his left hand, then with his right hand, pointed at Emperor Baoding with a 'chi' sound. Emperor Baoding slanted his body, dodging the attack, then returned a finger. The man in

green then struck out with his middle finger. Emperor Baoding's countenance grew heavy, and countered the attack with his own middle finger. The man in green's third attack came with a sweeping motion from his ring finger, then his fourth attack came from his pinky finger. In each case, Emperor Baoding countered with the exact same stance. When the time came for the fifth attack, the man in green pressed forward with his thumb. The thumb is the shortest of all fingers, and thus is the most ineffective and clumsy of them as well. But the power from this finger of his was the strongest yet. Emperor Baoding dared not to ignore it, and struck out with his own thumb as well.

Watching from the side, Zhong Ling felt quite curious and baffled. She forgot how afraid of the man in green she was. Laughing, she said, "What are you guys doing? Playing rock, paper, scissors? He's pointing at you, then you're pointing at him. Who is winning?" While speaking, she walked closer to them. Suddenly, a powerful gust suddenly appeared, pushing at her. Startled, Zhong Ling suddenly felt her left shoulder hurt, so badly that she almost fainted. Turning his hand over, Emperor Baoding waved his palm towards her, smoothly pushing her body backwards, then leapt backwards as well and supported her. He said, "Stand here and don't move." Startled, Zhong Ling asked, "Is he trying to kill me?" Emperor Baoding shook his head. "No. We're competing martial arts. Other people can't get close to us." Stretching out his hand, he gently patted her on the back a few times.

The man in green said, "Do you believe me yet?" Emperor Baoding rushed forward, then bowed towards the person. "Zhengming pays his respects to his senior!" The man in green said, "You only refer to me as your senior. Are you refusing to fully recognize me, or is there still doubt in your heart?" Emperor Baoding replied, "I, Zhengming, am the guardian of an entire country. My words and actions must therefore be correspondingly serious and certain. I,

Zhengming, have no sons. A heavy national responsibility is therefore laid upon the shoulders of this boy, Duan Yu. I ask for you, senior, to please release him." The man in green replied, "I want for Dali's Duan dynasty to collapse and engage in evil, incestuous acts, then come to an end. Such a rare opportunity as this, do you expect me to so easily let it slip away?" Emperor Baoding said in a stern voice, "I, Duan Zhengming, definitely will not allow it!"

The man in green laughed. "Heh, heh. You claim you are the emperor of Dali, but in my eyes, you are nothing but a rebel who coveted and stole the throne. If you have the courage to do so, feel free to go back and call out the national army and the imperial bodyguards. Let me tell you this. My influence is vastly less than yours, but for me to kill Duan Yu first would be accomplished as easily as turning over my hand. If you want to fight with me, you might be able to overcome me after several hundred stances. But if you want to actually kill me, that will be an incredibly difficult thing for you to accomplish. And as long as I am not dead, you will not be able to rescue Duan Yu."

The color of Emperor Baoding's face alternated between blue and white. He knew that this man's words definitely were not false. There was no need to call for the national army or the imperial guards; all he needed was a single helper, and this man in green wouldn't be able to hold out against them. But this would badly injure the reputation of the Duan family, and would not be in keeping with his own station. He couldn't kill this man either. He said, "What do you want, before you are willing to release him?" The man in green said, "Something that is easily done, very easily done. All you need to do is to go to Tianlongsi, the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, and become a monk. Give the title of emperor back to me, and I will dissolve the drugs in Duan Yu's body. I will return to you your good nephew, who is utterly without moral flaw or deficit, a rare dragon amongst men." Emperor Baoding replied, "How can I casually discard

the inheritance which my ancestors have passed down to me?"

The man in green laughed. "Heh, heh. So it was meant to be your inheritance, and not my inheritance? To return a possession to its original owner cannot be considered as 'casually discarding' it. For me to not pursue the matter of you conspiring to seize my throne is already a sign of my magnanimousness. If you aren't willing to do as I suggest, then you might as well wait for a while. After Duan Yu and his sister have a son together, I'll release them." Emperor Baoding replied, "Better that you kill them instead!"

The man in green replied, "Aside from this, there are two more options." Emperor Baoding asked, "What are they?" The man in green said, "The first option is to come up with a devious plot to murder me. Then, you can let him out." Emperor Baoding said, "I cannot plot against you." The man in green said, "Even if you wanted to scheme against me, you might not succeed. The second option is for you to call out Duan Yu and have him fight me himself, using the 'Solitary Solar Finger'. If he is able to defeat me, then he can leave, of course. Hah hah."

Emperor Baoding felt his temper rising, and almost flared out. Only with a powerful effort did he manage to curb it. "Duan Yu doesn't know a single shred of martial arts, much less know the 'Solitary Solar Finger'." The man in green replied, "The nephew of Dali's Duan Zhengming doesn't know the 'Solitary Solar Finger'? Who can believe that?" Emperor Baoding replied, "Ever since he was young, Duan Yu studied the classics and Buddhist texts. He has a merciful character, and steadfastly refused to learn martial arts." The man in green said, "Yet another hypocrite putting on airs of false righteousness. If a person like this becomes the monarch of Dali, it definitely will not be a good thing. Better for me to kill him first!"

Emperor Baoding asked forcefully, "Senior, are there truly no other options available?" The man in green replied,

"Years ago, if other options were available, would I have fallen to such a state? Half living, half dead. Others gave me no options back then. Why should I give you other options now?"

Emperor Baoding lowered his head and hesitated for a long moment. With a powerful effort, he raised his head. A resolute, unyielding expression was on his face. He called out, "Yu'er, I'll think of a way to rescue you. Never forget that you are a scion of the Duan family!"

Only to hear Duan Yu call out in reply, "Uncle, you...come in and kill me with a single finger." At this time, he had halted his footsteps, and was resting against the large boulder which was blocking the doorway. He clearly heard the second half of the conversation between Emperor Baoding and the man in green. Emperor Baoding said in a stern voice, "What? Have you acted in a way which would destroy the reputation of my Duan family?" Duan Yu replied, "No! No, I haven't. Your nephew...your nephew is suffering from extreme heat. I won't be able to live much longer."

Emperor Baoding sighed. "Life and death are determined by fate. Let things take their course!" Grasping Zhong Ling's arm, he ran across the open plains, then flew over the tree wall. He said, "Little girl, thank you for leading the way. In the future, I will definitely repay you." Retracing his steps, he returned to the main building.

Emperor Baoding saw that despite Chu Wanli and Fu Sigui teaming up against the Divine Crocodile, victory or defeat was still yet to be determined. But Zhu Danchen and Gu Ducheng, under the pressure of Ye Erniang's rectangular sabre, were finding it difficult to cope. To the side, although Yun Zhonghe's feet movements hadn't slowed in the slightest, he was panting heavily, as though he were feeling weary. But Ba Tianshi showed great ease and relaxation with his ceaseless leaps and bounds.

His hands folded behind his back, Gao Shengtai was casually strolling about as though he were utterly indifferent

to the life-and-death battles which were being played out before him. But in actuality, his senses were keenly attuned, and he was keeping track of the entire overall situation. So long as no one appeared to be in imminent danger, there was not yet a need for him to intervene.

Duan Zhengchun, Dao Baifeng, Qin Hongmian, and Zhong Wanchou had disappeared.

Emperor Baoding asked, "Where is younger brother Chun?" Gao Shengtai responded, "After the South-Subduing Prince chased away gorge-master Zhong, he left with the princess to locate young lord Duan." Emperor Baoding called out loudly, "At this moment, there have been unexpected developments in the situation. Everybody, withdraw!"

Ba Tianshi suddenly halted in his footsteps. Yun Zhonghe directly rushed towards him, and immediately, with a 'peng' sound, Ba Tianshi sent out a palm towards Yun Zhonghe, who blocked with his own twin palms. Yun Zhonghe felt as though his mind, his qi, and his blood were all thrown into turmoil, and almost vomited blood on the spot. He forcefully suppressed the urge, but his vision had turned blurry. He was unable to see clearly where his opponent had gone. Ba Tianshi, however, did not follow up on his victory and press home the attack. With a clear, cold laugh, he said, "Thanks for the lesson!"

Suddenly, Duan Zhengchun's voice could be heard from behind the copse of trees to the west. "He isn't here either. Let's return to the back of the house and check again." Dao Baifeng's voice followed. "Let's just find someone and interrogate them. Can it be that this place really has no servants at all?" Next came Qin Hongmian's voice. "My martial-sister told them to all go into hiding."

Emperor Baoding, Gao Shengtai, and Ba Tianshi exchanged incredulous glances and smiles. All three of them felt that the South-Subduing Prince's ability truly was vast and godlike. None of them had a clue as to what brilliant technique he used to cause these two women, who

previously had been locked in a battle of life and death, to set aside their differences and work together to search for Duan Yu.

Only to hear Duan Zhengchun say, "Then let's go find your martial-sister. She certainly knows where Yu'er has been imprisoned." Dao Baifeng angrily said, "I won't allow you to go see Gan Baobao! You scheming bastard!" Qin Hongmian said, "My martial-sister has already sworn to never see you ever again."

While chatting, the three of them exited the tree line. Seeing Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun said, "Elder brother, did you resc-...did you locate Yu'er yet?" At first, he was going to ask if Duan Yu had been rescued, but seeing that his son wasn't here, he changed the sentence midstream. Emperor Baoding nodded. "I found him. Let's talk about it when we get back home."

Chu Wanli, Zhu Danchen, and the others had heard the emperor's order to cease fighting, and had every intention of doing so, but Ye Erniang and the Divine Crocodile were enjoying the battle. They had no intention of stopping, and continued to embroil their opponents in this deadly battle. Emperor Baoding's brows furrowed slightly. "Let's go."

Gao Shengtai replied, "Yes sir!" He withdrew his iron flute from his breast pockets, and with a 'ting' sound, pointed it at the Divine Crocodile's throat. Following that, he raised his arm and flipped his hand, sweeping the flute against Ye Erniang. These two attacks with the flute were both aimed at critical cracks in the enemy's defense. The Divine Crocodile managed to dodge by somersaulting away. With a clapping sound, the iron flute repeatedly struck Ye Erniang's left arm. Ye Erniang let out a loud cry, then hastily glided away, beating a retreat.

Actually, Gao Shengtai's level of martial arts wasn't that much superior to these two. But he had been watching the fights progress for a long time, and had long since devised masterful strokes to deal with those two. Although his attack

seemed as though it was meant to deal purely with the Divine Crocodile, it was actually a feint. His fierce, unexpected, genuine attack was actually aimed towards Ye Erniang, repaying her for the injury that palm of her had inflicted upon him. Although it appeared as though he executed these strokes as casually as another might write a few lines of free verse, in actuality, he had contemplated this attack in his heart many times. He had gathered all of his power, then struck out with full force with this attack.

The Divine Crocodile's bean-like eyes widened. He felt both alarmed and respectful. "Sonufa****, what a guy! I couldn't tell that you..." He didn't complete the line of thought, but the meaning was naturally, "I couldn't tell that you're actually this fearsome. Looks like your old man here isn't your match, kid."

Dao Baifeng asked Emperor Baoding, "Emperor, how is Yu'er?" Emperor Baoding's mind was filled with worry, but didn't allow a single flicker of it to show on his expression. He said, in a voice devoid of passion, "He's fine. This is an excellent opportunity for him to build up his self-discipline and to temper his character. He'll come out in a few days. We'll discuss this at length when we return to the palace." After these words, he turned and immediately left.

Ba Tianshi took the front and led the way, while Duan Zhengchun and his wife stayed behind the emperor. Following them was Chu, Gu, Fu, and Zhu, the Four Imperial Guards, with Gao Shengtai bringing up the rear. With that outstandingly brilliant attack earlier, he had managed to cow those two people. Although the Divine Crocodile was violent and ferocious, he didn't dare to go up and challenge him.

After walking thirty or so meters, Duan Zhengchun couldn't help but turn his head and gaze back at Qin Hongmian. Qin Hongmian was also watching his receding

figure. Their two pairs of eyes met, and both of them were struck dumb.

Suddenly, Zhong Wanchou brandished his large-ringed sabre and rushed out, flustered and exasperated, from the back room. He called out, "Duan Zhengchun! On this visit, you weren't able to see my wife. Consider that your good fortune! I won't give you trouble on your way out. My wife has already sworn an oath that she will never see you again in the future. But...but...but I can't rely on that alone! If she sees you again, maybe she'll ****ing...she'll...bah, to put it briefly, you aren't allowed to come here again!" After fighting with Duan Zhengchun and being unable to achieve victory after many stances, he had immediately retreated, going back to guard his wife, so as to prevent Duan Zhengchun from coming for her and seducing her. After hearing his wife swear an oath that she definitely would never see Duan Zhengchun again, he was hugely relieved, and then hurriedly ran out again to make this demand towards Duan Zhengchun.

Duan Zhengchun's heart was saddened. He secretly said to himself, "Why? Why is it that you refuse to see me in the future? You are already another man's wife. How could I possibly act to ruin your chastity? Although the second son of Dali's Duan dynasty is dissolute and lascivious, he isn't a shameless, contemptible thug. Just let me see you again. Even if the two of us stood far away from each other and didn't say a single word to each other, I would be happy." Turning his head, he saw that his wife was gazing at him coldly. His own heart suddenly trembled, and he sped up his footsteps, leaving the gorge.

The party returned to Dali. Emperor Baoding said, "Everybody, let us discuss the situation at the palace." Arriving at the royal study in the imperial palace, Emperor Baoding sat on a chair covered with leopard fur in the middle of the room. Duan Zhengchun and his wife sat on the

ground next to him. Gao Shengtai and the others cupped their hands, awaiting further orders.

Emperor Baoding ordered that stools be brought for each of them, then ordered for them to be seated. Dismissing the servants, he explained how it was that Duan Yu fell into the enemy's hands. Everyone knew that the man in green was the key to the situation. Upon hearing Emperor Baoding say that not only did this person know the 'Solitary Solar Finger', but that his skill in it was above the emperor's own, everyone present didn't dare to interrupt. Each of them lowered their heads in thought. They all knew that the 'Solitary Solar Finger' was something which was passed down from one generation to the next within the Duan family. Only the sons were trained in it, and not the daughters, much less outsiders. If the man in green knew this art, he must be the offspring of the royal line.

(Note: This rule was unbroken until a later descendant of the Duan family, Duan Zhixing, also known as Master Yideng, broke the ancestral proscriptions by teaching this divine art to Wang Chongyang in order to subdue Ouyang Feng. He later passed the teachings of it to his four disciples: The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer, and the scholar. For a comprehensive overview, see 'Legend of the Eagle-Shooting Heroes'.) [Translator's note: This note was not put in by me, but was included in the text of my copy of the novel.]

Emperor Baoding said to Duan Zhengchun, "Younger brother Chun, try and guess who this person is." Duan Zhengchun lowered his head. "I can't guess it. Can it be that someone from the Heavenly Dragon Monastery has returned to the secular world?" Emperor Baoding said, "No. It is Crown Prince Yanqing!"

After these words were spoken, everyone present was extremely shocked. Duan Zhengchun said, "Crown Prince Yanqing left the mortal world long ago! This man surely must be an imposter who is faking his identity!" Emperor Baoding

replied, "His identity can be faked, but the 'Solitary Solar Finger' cannot be. It's a commonplace occurrence in the wulin for someone to secretly learn the martial arts of another sect. But how could anyone possibly manage to pilfer his way into this type of internal energy learning? This person is definitely Crown Prince Yanqing. There is no mistaking it!"

Duan Zhengchun pondered this for a long time. He asked, "Then he is a noble figure within our Duan family. Why would he choose to destroy pristine and pure reputation of our house?" Emperor Baoding sighed. "This person's entire body is crippled. His temperament is strange as well. Nothing can be understood through conventional reasoning. Much less, I now sit on Dali's imperial throne. His heart is naturally filled with resentment and melancholy. He wants for us brothers to have our reputations swept away."

Duan Zhengchun said, "Elder brother, you assumed the throne long ago. The ministers and the common folk alike support you, and the borders are peaceful. Forget about Crown Prince Yanqing, even if Emperor Shangde [Duan Yanqing's father] was reborn, he couldn't reclaim the throne."

Gao Shengtai rose to his feet. "The South-Subduing Prince's words are absolutely correct. Let's just have Crown Prince Yanqing deliver young lord Duan into our hands. In fact, there's no need for us to recognize him as a Crown Prince at all. We should only view him as the leader of the four most evil villains in all the world, whom every man must condemn and punish. Although he possesses a high level of martial arts, in the end, he can't overmatch all of us."

[This excerpt is translated partially by Laviathan, partially by me.]

More than ten years ago during the fifth year in the reign of the Emperor Shangde Duan Lianyi, a great and sudden upheaval occurred in the court of Dali. The Emperor Shangde was killed by the treacherous official Yang Yizhen.

Consequently, Duan Shouhui, the nephew of the deceased emperor, sought the assistance of the eminent monks of the Heavenly Dragon Temple and the loyal minister Gao Zhisheng to have Yang Yizhen killed. After ascending the throne, Duan Shouhui became the Shangming emperor. Emperor Shangming did not want to be an emperor. After reigning for but a single year, he abdicated and became a Buddhist monk at the Heavenly Dragon Temple, giving his position to his younger cousin Duan Zhengming, who became the Baoding emperor. The Emperor Shangde had a son, whom the court addressed as Prince Yanqing. During the coup of Yang Yizhen, the situation had been so chaotic that no one knew where Prince Yanqing had gone. He was soon presumed dead, killed by Yang. Therefore, no one had expected that Prince Yanqing would suddenly reappear so many years after the incident.

[Excerpt completed.]

After hearing Gao Shengtai's words, Emperor Baoding shook his head. "The position of emperor originally belonged to Crown Prince Yanqing. It was only because he could not be found that Emperor Shangming accepted the throne, then passed it to me. Since Crown Prince Yanqing has appeared, I should resign my position to him." Turning his head, he said to Gao Shengtai, "If your esteemed father was still alive, he would be of like mind." Gao Shengtai was the son of Gao Zhisheng, a minister who had rendered outstanding service. The wiping out of the rebel forces in the past was completely due to the great efforts Gao Zhisheng had exerted.

Gao Shengtai took a step forward, then knelt down. "My late father was loyal to his lord and loved his citizens. This freak in green claims to be the leader of the Four Evils. If he became the monarch of Dali, who can imagine how much the people would suffer under his reign? Even if I, your servant, were threatened with ten thousand deaths, I cannot accept your abdication!"

Also kneeling down, Ba Tianshi said, "Earlier, I heard the monstrous voice of the Divine Crocodile calling out and saying that their leader, the head of the Four Evils, was known as...what was it again? 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity'? If this person is not Crown Prince Yanqing, he naturally cannot be allowed to achieve his goals. But even if he is Crown Prince Yanqing, how can such a vicious, treacherous knave be allowed to rule over the people of Dali? If that were to happen, the country would certainly collapse, and many lives would be lost."

Emperor Baoding waved his arm. "The two of you, please rise. Your words are full of sense and reason. But Yu'er has fallen into his clutches. Aside from me abdicating, what method is there for us to get Yu'er back home?"

Duan Zhengchun said, "Elder brother, we, the subjects, should be the ones giving away our lives to help protect our emperor. Even though you love Yu'er, how can you throw away your important position for him? Even if Yu'er manages to escape using your method, he would become the greatest sinner of all Dali."

Emperor Baoding rose to his feet. With his left hand, he stroked his long beard, while he lightly tapped his forehead with two fingers of his right hand. He began to pace in a circle in the study room. Everyone here knew that he always pondered in such a way when he was unsure as to how to best deal with an important issue. No one dared to make a sound, for fear of derailing his train of thought. Emperor Baoding walked back and forth. Only after a long time had passed did he speak again. "Crown Prince Yanqing is a poisonous and vile schemer. He fed Yu'er the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder. The strength of this drug is very profound. It's difficult for ordinary people to resist. I fear...I fear that his brain has already been fully bewildered by this drug." He sighed. "This is is a villainous plot indeed. We can't hold Yu'er responsible for what he does."

Duan Zhengchun lowered his head. His sense of shame was boundless. He thought to himself that the root of this disaster came from his dissolute, lascivious way.

Emperor Baoding returned to his seat. “Minister Ba, issue a decree. Have the Imperial Hanlin Academy prepare a written edict, conferring up on my brother, Zhengchun, the position of Huang Taidi, ‘Imperial Crown Brother’. [This is a title conferred upon a sibling of an Emperor which puts that sibling first in the line of succession for the throne, above that of even the Emperor’s own children.]

Duan Zhengchun was startled, then hurriedly knelt down. “Elder brother, you have always been benevolent and upright, and have governed the people virtuously. The heavens will surely protect you, and you will have countless sons and grandsons. Please rescind your edict!”

Extending his hand, Emperor Baoding lifted Duan Zhengchun up. “You and I are brothers. The country of Dali should’ve been administered by the both of us to begin with. Forget about the fact that I don’t have sons or grandsons. Even if I had both, I would transfer my throne to you. Younger brother Chun, I made the decision to make you my heir long ago. Everyone in the country knows that. Today, we’ll make it official, to let Crown Prince Yanqing know that he will not achieve his heart’s desire!”

Duan Zhengchun declined multiple times, but Emperor Baoding refused to allow him to. He had no choice but to kowtow and thank the emperor. Gao Shengtai and the others rushed forward to congratulate him. As Emperor Baoding was without sons, the imperial throne would definitely go to Duan Zhengchun in the future. This is something which had been long anticipated, and no one was surprised at all. Emperor Baoding said, “Everyone, go get some rest. This affair with Crown Prince Yanqing can only be told to Minister of Education Hua, and Minister of War Fan. Besides those two, this secret cannot be divulged.” Everyone agreed in one voice, then left after paying their respects. Ba Tianshi

immediately left for the Imperial Hanlin Academy to publicly declare the imperial order.

Emperor Baoding ate some food, then took a little nap. When he woke up, he faintly heard the sounds of celebration from outside, as firecrackers exploded ceaselessly. A servant helped him into his robes, then reported, "After hearing that your majesty conferred the position of 'Imperial Crown Brother' upon the South-Subduing Prince, the common people were filled with joy and started to celebrate. It's quite lively outside." In the past few years, military ventures had become outmoded in Dali, and the imperial court was pure and bright. The citizens lived and worked in peace and happiness. They absolutely loved and respected such rulers as Emperor Baoding, the South-Subduing Prince, and the Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment.

Emperor Baoding said, "Send forth my decree. Tomorrow, hang out colored lanterns in celebration everywhere. Cancel the usual curfews. Reward the entire army, and bestow a gift of wine and meat to all the elderly and all the orphans." After this edict was passed out, the joy of the common people only increased even more, to the point of the entire city boiling with it.

At the fall of night, Emperor Baoding changed into cheap clothes and left the palace by himself. He covered much of his face with a big hat, hiding his features behind it. Everywhere he went, he only saw the common people clapping and singing songs of praise, with young men and women singing and dancing together.

At the time, the people of the central plains considered the people of Dali to be barbarians, as their etiquettes and customs were very different from that of China proper. The streets were filled with young men and women holding hands, flirting, and laughing together as though they were in a secluded area. No one thought this was strange at all. Emperor Baoding secretly prayed, "If only the people of Dali can forever be so happy."

After leaving the city, he hastened his steps, traveling more than twenty li before he entered a mountain range. The farther he walked, the more barren was the land around him. After passing through four mountain cavities, he arrived in front of a small monastery. At the monastery gates were written the words, "Flower Gathering Monastery". The national religion of Dali was Buddhism. There were tens of large monasteries outside the nation's capitals, and over a hundred small ones. The 'Flower Gathering Monastery' was far away from civilization, and few joss sticks were burning in front of it. Even if one was a citizen of Dali, one might not know of the place.

Emperor Baoding stood silently in front of the monastery for a short moment, then strode forward and lightly knocked three times at the gate. After quite some time, the monastery gates opened and a novice monk came out. He politely asked, "A respected guest has brightened our doorway. What worthy purpose has led you here?" Emperor Baoding replied, "I'd like to trouble you to inform Master Huangmei [lit. 'Yellow Brows'] that an old friend, Duan Zhengming, is requesting to see him." The novice monk said, "Please, enter."

Turning, he respectfully waved him in. Emperor Baoding lifted up his foot, preparing to step inside the monastery. He suddenly heard two clear 'ding' sounds emanate from a chime in the inner courtyard. All of a sudden, his entire body felt cool and pure. His thoughts became tranquil, and his spirit filled with peace.

Freed of anxiety, he entered the monastery and headed for the inner courtyard. The novice monk said, "Respected guest, please wait here. I will go report to my master." Emperor Baoding said, "Alright." Folding his hands behind his back, he stood in the middle of the courtyard.

There was a ginkgo tree standing in the courtyard. He watched as a single yellow leaf slowly drifted down from it.

In his entire life, there had been extremely few instances of him standing outside and waiting for someone else. But as soon as he entered the 'Flower Gathering Monastery', customs and conventions died away. He totally forgot that he was the emperor.

Suddenly, an aged voice laughed. "My worthy younger brother Duan, what problems do you have in your heart?" Emperor Baoding turned around, seeing a tall, lofty old monk with a face full of wrinkles push open the door from a small residence. On this old monk's face was two long, sickly yellow eyebrows, the tails of which sagged downwards. It was the Yellow Browed Monk.

Cupping his hands, Emperor Baoding said, "Excuse me for disrupting your meditations." The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "Please, enter." Emperor Baoding strode forward and entered the small residence. Two middle-aged monks immediately cupped their hands, paying their respects to him. Emperor Baoding knew that they must be the disciples of the Yellow Browed Monk, and quickly returned their salute. He sat down on a prayer mat to the left of the main prayer mat, which the Yellow Browed Monk took.

After the Yellow Browed Monk seated himself, Emperor Baoding said, "I have a nephew named Duan Yu. When he was seven, I carried him here, and we listened to you, martial brother, expound on the scriptures." The Yellow Browed Monk let out a small smile. "That child has an extremely remarkable comprehension. He's a good kid. Good kid!" Emperor Baoding said, "He has been enlightened by Buddhism doctrine and has a merciful heart. He was unwilling to learn martial arts in order to avoid killing others." The Yellow Browed Monk said, "If one doesn't know martial arts, one can still kill others. If one learns martial arts, one still might not kill others."

Emperor Baoding replied, "Yes!" Thereupon he related the story of how Duan Yu was firmly opposed to learning martial arts and ran away from home, how he met Mu Wanqing, and

how he was trapped by 'The Most Evil Man in the World', Crown Prince Yanqing, inside the stone house. A small smile on his lips, the Yellowed Browed Monk listened quietly, not interjecting a single time. The faces of his two disciples, who were standing behind him and waiting on him, didn't change in the slightest.

After Emperor Baoding was finished, the Yellow Browed Monk slowly said, "This Crown Prince Yanqing is your older male cousin. It's inappropriate for you to fight with him. It's even inappropriate for you to send your subordinates to fight with him." Emperor Baoding replied, "Martial brother, you see things clearly." The Yellow Browed Monk said, "The elder monks of the Heavenly Dragon Temple are extremely virtuous, and their martial arts exceed yours as well, worthy brother. But by entering Buddhist orders, they have severed their ties with the Duan dynasty. It's also inappropriate for them to side with you, worthy brother, in an internicine dispute. Thus, you cannot request aid from the Heavenly Dragon Temple as well." Emperor Baoding said, "Exactly so."

The Yellow Browed Monk nodded. He extended his middle finger slowly, then pointed towards Emperor Baoding. Emperor Baoding let out a small smile, then pointed out with his own finger as well. Aiming at the Yellow Browed Monk's middle finger, he pointed towards it. Their figures swayed, and they immediately withdrew their fingers. The Yellow Browed Monk said, "Worthy brother Duan, the force from my 'Vajra Finger' cannot overcome your 'Solitary Solar Finger'." Emperor Baoding replied, "Martial brother, your wisdom is deep and your intelligence is vast. You can achieve victory without purely relying on the power of your fingers." The Yellow Browed Monk lowered his head and was silent.

Emperor Baoding rose to his feet. "Five years ago, you told me to revoke the salt taxes. But I did not, for two reasons. First, the country did not need it. And secondly, I desired for Duan Zhengchun to assume the throne after me, and intended for him to do it in my stead, thereby winning

the hearts of the populace. But tomorrow, I will immediately order for the salt taxes to be abrogated."

The Yellow Browed Monk stood up, then knelt and respectfully prostrated himself before the Emperor. "Worthy brother, you take such care of your people. This old monk is endlessly gratified." Emperor Baoding also knelt down and returned the bow. He said nothing more, and quickly glided away from the monastery.

Returning to the palace, Emperor Baoding immediately ordered the servants to summon Minister Ba. He ordered him to abolish the salt tax. Ba Tianshi kowtowed, thanking the Emperor for his benevolence. "Majesty, your great benevolence is the utmost fortune of the common people." Emperor Baoding said, "Make sure that our own use of salts is reduced and restrained whenever possible in the palace. Go discuss this with ministers Hua and Fan and see if you can think of any areas where we can cut back." Ba Tianshi agreed and left the palace.

Ba Tianshi immediately arranged for a meeting with Minister Hua Hegen, and together they arrived at the manor of Fan Hua, the Minister of War. He informed them of the abolishment of the salt tax. With regards to the matter of Duan Yu being kidnapped, he had already informed them earlier.

Fan Hua muttered to himself, "The South-Subduing Prince's son has fallen into the hands of a vile man. For the Emperor to suddenly decide to abolish the salt tax...he must be using this as a method of beseeching heaven for its help to return the South-Subduing Prince's son safe and sound. If we cannot help alleviate his concerns as an Emperor and as an uncle, what face will we have to remain in the leadership position of the imperial court?"

Ba Tianshi said, "Exactly so. Second brother, what brilliant scheme have you thought of to rescue the child?" Fan Hua replied, "Since our opponent is Crown Prince Yanqing, the Emperor will do everything possible to avoid

directly confronting him as an enemy. I do have a plan, but I'm afraid it will be burdensome for our elder brother." Minister Hua Hegen hurriedly said, "So what if it requires hard work? Second brother, hurry and explain."

Fan Hua explained, "The Emperor himself said that Crown Prince Yanqing's martial arts ability was slightly above that of his own. Naturally, it won't be possible for us to forcibly break Duan Yu out of the house. Elder brother, why don't you once more take up that old profession of yours from twenty years ago?" Minister Hua's entire face blushed red. He laughed. "Second brother, you're making fun of me again."

The Minister of Education Hua Hegen was originally named Hua Egen. He was of lowly birth. Although he had now risen to the stature of being one of the three most powerful ministers of Dali, before his rise, he was in the business of graverobbing. His best skill was in looting the tombs of princes and rich merchants. After they died, these wealthy people would often be buried with many riches and precious treasures. Hua Egen would tunnel his way into the tombs and steal the treasures. Although it required a tremendous amount of effort, he was never detected by anyone.

Once, upon tunneling his way into a particular tomb, he discovered a secret martial arts manual. Practicing in accordance with it, he managed to learn an extraordinarily powerful set of exterior martial arts. Following that, he abandoned his mean job and became an assistant to Emperor Baoding, rendering outstanding service and finally rose to the prestigious level of Minister of Education. He felt that the deeds attached to his old name were too vulgar, and therefore changed his name to Hegen. Aside from Ba Tianshi and Fan Hua, those two dear friends of his whom he had undergone life and death experiences with, very few people knew of his origins.

Fan Hua said, "How would I dare mock you, elder brother? I was thinking of us secretly sneaking inside the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, then digging a tunnel straight into the stone house where the South-Subduing Prince's son is kept. That way, without a single soul knowing, we would be able to rescue him."

Hua Hegen slapped his thigh. "Brilliant! Brilliant!" He was born addicted to the hobby of tomb-robbing. Although in the past twenty years he didn't dare do such a thing, whenever he thought about the old days and reminisced, his hands couldn't help but itch. But he was a high official of exceeding rank and glory. How could he possibly go back to grave-robbing again? But now, upon hearing Fan Hua's words, he couldn't help but be hugely delighted.

Fan Hua laughed. "Elder brother, don't be too happy this early. There are plenty of difficulties with regards to this plan. The Four Evils are residing within this gorge; in addition, Zhong Wanchou, his wife, and the Asura Sabre are also exceptionally formidable people. To keep this hidden from them really is no simple task. In addition, Crown Prince Yanqing has personally decided to serve as garrison for the stone house. If the tunnel is dug past him, how could he not feel it?

Hua Hegen mumbled to himself for a long while, then said, "The tunnel must be dug from the back of the stone house, so as to avoid Crown Prince Yanqing." Ba Tianshi said, "The South-Subduing Prince's son is in imminent danger. Digging a tunnel is no small task. I'm worried that we won't be able to complete it in time." Hua Hegen said, "Let us three brothers do it together. I'll have to request that you lower your stations and dignity, and learn the arts of being a petty graverobbing thief from me." Ba Tianshi laughed. "It seems that the three great ministers of Dali are now unshakeably duty-bound to engage in the unsavory business of tomb raiding." All three of them laughed, clapping their hands together.

Hua Hegen said, "There's no time to waste. If we're going to do it, let's do it!" Ba Tianshi immediately whipped out the map of the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. Hua Hegen drafted out a proposed tunnel route. The issues of what to do with the dirt they dug out, or how to avoid being detected, were things that he was incomparably skilled at.

Duan Yu had felt hot and agitated for every moment within the past day and night. He began to use the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves', walking about quickly within the room. He only needed to complete one or two revolutions before feeling a sense of coolness. But Mu Wanqing's entire body felt as though it were scorching, and her senses were addled. At least half the time, she would just dazedly lean against the stone wall.

At midday, Duan Yu once more began to stride about the room. Suddenly, he heard an aged voice speak from outside. "So very many people have been engrossed by the nineteen horizontal and vertical lines. Layman, would you be in the mood to discuss some things with this old monk?" Duan Yu felt strange. He immediately slowed down his footsteps, and after taking ten more, came to a halt altogether. He peered outside via the hole through which food was delivered.

He saw an old monk with sallow yellow eyebrows and a face filled with wrinkles. In his left hand, he held a steel muyu instrument [Buddhist percussion instrument used to beat a rhythm while chanting prayers] the size of a rice bowl. In his right hand, he held a hammer. He repeatedly struck the muyu with the hammer several times, producing a series of loud clangs. From the sound of it, the hammer must have been made of steel as well. While doing so, he chanted Buddhist prayers. "Amitufo! Amitufo!"

Bowing his head, he pointed the hammer at a blue stone in front of the stone house and began to draw a line. With a 'chi' sound, bits of stone began to fly everywhere, and a straight line immediately appeared. Duan Yu felt strange. He vaguely felt as though he had seen this old monk before in

the past. The power in his hands was incredible. With but a casual wave of the hand, a deep mark had been made in the blue stone. The results were similar to that which a stonemason might have achieved using hammer and chisel over a long period of time. The line carved was extremely straight as well. If a stonemason had wanted to carve out a line so straight, he would have had to draw it out first.

A gloomy voice in front of the stone house spoke. "Power of the Vajra Finger. Good skill!" It was the man in green, "Evil Beyond Human Capacity." Stretching out his left cane, he also carved out a horizontal line on the stone. This straight line intersected perfectly with the one carved out by the Yellow Browed Monk. His line was also carved deeply within the stone and very straight, without any crookedness or curvature.

The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "Benefactor, you are willing to grant your instructions to me? Excellent, excellent." He carved out a second vertical line with his steel hammer. Following him, the man in green carved out a horizontal line with his steel cane. And thus, in such a manner, these two exerted their energies to carve. They carved slower and slower, unwilling for there to be the slightest difference in the depth of their respective lines, or crookedness in their lines. If that had happened, they would have lost to their opponent.

In the time it would take to cook a bowl of rice, the nineteen horizontal and vertical lines of a Go chessboard had been neatly carved out on the stone. The Yellow Browed Monk thought to himself, "Mr. Zhengming spoke truly. Crown Prince Yanqing's internal energy really is formidable." Crown Prince Yanqing didn't know that the Yellow Browed Monk had come with a specific purpose in mind. He was shocked, wondering to himself, "Where did such a powerful old monk come from? Hm, he must be a helper whom Duan Zhengming called for. With him keeping me entangled, if

Duan Zhengming were to go rescue Duan Yu, I would be unable to prevent him from doing so.”

The Yellow Browed Monk said, “Benefactor Duan, your strength is deep and profound. Admirable, admirable. Your skill at chess is surely tenfold that of this old monk’s as well. This old monk would like to request that you allow me a handicap of four stones.” The man in green was startled. He thought to himself, “The power of your fingers is so very profound. You must be a famous man of high status. You came to challenge me. How could you immediately ask for me to give way to you?” He replied, “Master, no need to be courteous. Victory and defeat must naturally be determined on an even playing field.” The Yellow Browed Monk replied, “You really must allow me the handicap of four stones.” The man in green said emotionlessly, “Since you claim that you have little skill in chess, there is no need for you to force yourself to play.” The Yellow Browed Monk replied, “Then just let me have an advantage of three stones instead?” The man in green replied, “I will give you a handicap of one stone, if you give me the same.”

The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. “Evidently, your accomplishments in the field of chess are limited. I’ll allow you the handicap of three stones instead.” The man in green replied, “That is also unnecessary. We shall simply play.” In the Yellow Browed Monk’s heart, a feeling of dread grew. “This man is neither conceited nor rash. He is somber to the extreme. A truly formidable opponent. No matter how I badgered him, he wouldn’t react to me.” As it happened, the Yellow Browed Monk wasn’t certain of victory. He knew that all chess players liked to outdo others. Generally, when he requested a handicap of three or four stones, his opponents would agree. He himself was beyond such worldly things, and cared little for such empty things as reputations. If Crown Prince Yanqing, desiring to flaunt his abilities in chess, had agreed to allow a handicap, the Yellow Browed Monk would have gained a massive advantage, and

naturally would have had an increased chance of success in this battle. He didn't expect that Crown Prince Yanqing neither allowed others to take advantage of him, nor would take advantage of others. He wasn't the least bit negligent, showing an unparalleled solemnity and sternness.

The Yellow Browed Monk said, "Fine. You're the host. I'm the guest. I'll take the first move." The man in green said, "No! A powerful dragon cannot crush a snake in his own haunts [lit., a powerful force must give way to a weaker one if on the weaker one's turf]. I will go first." The Yellow Browed Monk said, "Then the only way we can determine who will go first is via a guessing game. Please guess if my age this year is even or odd. If you guess correctly, you may go first. If not, I go first." The man in green said, "Even if I guess correctly, you will deny it." The Yellow Browed Monk said, "Fine! Then guess something which I won't be able to deny. When I am seventy years old, will the number of toes on my feet be even, or odd?"

This riddle was extremely bizarre. The man in green thought to himself, "Everyone has ten toes. Of course the number will be even. He's purposefully trying to lead me into saying that the number of toes he has when he is seventy will be an odd number. It is written in the Art of War that lies are hidden within the truth, and the truth is hidden within lies. He has ten toes, but purposefully made the exact number seem mysterious so as to deceive me. How can I fall for such a trick?" He said, "The number is even." The Yellow Browed Monk replied, "Wrong. It is odd." The man in green said, "Remove your shoes and prove it."

The Yellow Browed Monk took off his left shoe, revealing five toes in perfectly good shape. The man in green, observing his opponent's countenance, saw a small smile on his face. He thought to himself, "So he really only has four toes on his right feet." He watched as the monk unhurriedly removed his right shoe as well, then slowly began to remove his socks. He was just about to say, "No need to check. Just

go ahead and play the first stone.” But suddenly, he thought to himself, “Wait. I can’t fall for a trick.” He watched as the monk removed the sock from his right foot as well. Once again, five perfect, undamaged toes were revealed. Where was any disfigurement? There was none at all.

Countless thoughts flashed through the mind of the man in green, as he wondered what was the meaning behind this move of his opponent. Only to see the Yellow Browed Monk casually wave his small steel hammer downwards. With a ‘ka’ sound, he chopped off the pinky toe of his right foot. His two disciples stood behind him. Upon seeing their master disfigure himself, causing blood to flow in front of him, they couldn’t help but let out an ‘ah’ cry. Uncertainly, the elder disciple took out the ‘Golden Salve’ medicine from his breastpocket, applying it to his master’s wounds. Ripping off part of his clothes, he bound up the wound.

The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. “This old monk is sixty nine years old. When I am seventy years old, the number of toes on my feet will be odd.”

The man in green said, “So it will be. You may move first.” He was known as ‘The Most Evil Man in the World’. What type of vile or brutal atrocity had he not committed? Why would he care about the mere chopping off of a pinky toe? But upon seeing this old monk be willing to part with his own toe and resort to such extreme methods in order to gain the small advantage of moving first, he knew that he would definitely prove the victor in this game of chess. Even if he lost, the terms which he would exact would be harsh beyond imagining.

The Yellow Browed Monk replied, “Thank you for giving way.” Extending his steel mallet, he drew two circles on a diagonal line of the inside of the board, symbolizing white chess pieces. The man in green extended his own cane and lightly pressed on the line of the opposing diagonal. The circular indentation served to symbolize the black chess pieces. Together, the four formed a square within the middle

of the board. To place two black and two white chess pieces on the board in such a fashion, forming a 'shizi', was a rule in the ancient Chinese art of Go. The white pieces would be placed first, followed by the black pieces, opposite of what later generations would do. Following this, the Yellow Browed Monk placed a white piece in the 'Ping' quadrant, where the sixth vertical and third horizontal lines intersected. The man in green answered with a piece at where the ninth vertical and third horizontal lines intersected. These two starting moves came extremely quickly. The Yellow Browed Monk didn't dare to be the slightest bit negligent, for fear of losing the advantage which he had purchased using his own pinky toe.

By the time the seventeenth or eighteenth stones were laid, the two sides were in diametric opposition to each other, engaging in a fierce struggle. At the same time, the power from each person's finger continued to be used up. They focused on the game, striving for victory, while also generating their internal energies. The game began to slow down.

The second disciple of the Yellow Browed Monk, Pochen, was also an expert at this game. He saw his master and the man in green utilize marvelous military tactics, and many variations were used. A threat to the Yellow Browed Monk's pieces in the lower right corner of the board appeared. If the Yellow Browed Monk did not move to cope with the threat, he would be exposing those pieces to extreme hidden dangers. But if he used a piece to guard that corner, he would have lost the offensive.

The Yellow Browed Monk was unable to make up his mind for a long time. Suddenly, a voice cried out from the stone house. "Counterattack at the 'Qu' quadrant, and you won't lose the offensive." As it happened, Duan Yu excelled at chess ever since his youth. At this moment, seeing the vicious battle which those two were engaged in, he couldn't help but blurt out what the next move should be. A common

saying described this situation most aptly: "The spectators see clearly, the players' eyes are clouded." Duan Yu's skill in chess was higher than that of the Yellow Browed Monk. With him being in the position of a spectator, it was all the more easier for him to see the key to solving the dilemma.

The Yellow Browed Monk said, "This old monk was going to make that move all along. Only, I was unable to follow through with that choice. Young benefactor, your words have removed the doubt in my mind." He immediately placed a piece at the 'Qu' position, where the seventh vertical line met the third horizontal. According to ancient Chinese rules of playing Go, the chessboard was divided into the quadrants of "Ping", "Shang", "Qu", and "Ru". The "Qu" quadrant was in the upper right corner.

The man in green said emotionlessly, "The onlooker who does not speak is of noble character; the player who makes his own move is a true man." Duan Yu yelled back, "You imprisoned me in this room. You aren't a gentleman of noble character to begin with!" The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "I'm a true monk, not a true man." The man in green said, "Shameless. Shameless." After thinking for a moment, he pressed his cane down and created an indentation within the 'Qu' quadrant.

After their armies had exchanged countless attacks, the Yellow Browed Monk's forces were once more in danger. His disciple, Pochen, was worried while watching. Duan Yu, however, didn't make a sound. Thus Pochen walked next to the stone house. In a low voice, he whispered, "Mr. Duan, how should this next move be played?" Duan Yu replied, "I already thought of a solution. The problem is, the solution must be implemented across seven moves. If I say it and the opponent hears me, he'll counter it. That is why I hesitated to speak." Pochen extended his right palm. With his left hand, he wrote on his right palm, "Please write it out." Following that, he immediately extended his hand into the hole in the boulder. But as he did so, he said, "Since this is

the case, there's nothing that can be done." He knew that the internal strength of the man in green was astonishing. No matter in how low a voice Duan Yu whispered, he would overhear.

Duan Yu thought to himself that this strategy was brilliant. He immediately stretched out his finger and wrote out the seven moves. He said, "The venerable master is an expert at chess. He certainly has a wonderful move in mind. There's no need for me to give any more advice." Pochen thought for a while, then realized that these seven moves truly were extremely clever. He returned to his master's side. Extending his finger, he began to write out those moves on his master's back. The billowing folds of the sleeves of his cassock hid his hands, rendering the man in green unable to see his chicanery. The Yellow Browed Monk thought for another moment, then made his move as instructed.

The man in green let out a 'heng' sound. "Another instructed you to make this move. Based upon your own accomplishments in chess, Master, you could never have formulated such a move." The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "The game of chess originated as a battle of the wits. A person must be modest and not reveal their real skill to the opponent. If the depths of my chess abilities could be seen easily and totally seen through by you, benefactor, would we even need to play this match?" The man in green replied, "Crafty, cunning schemer, playing tricks with your sleeves." He had seen Pochen walk back and forth, then cover the Yellow Browed Monk's back with his sleeves. He knew that there must be something odd about that action. But he was too busy concentrating on the changes and variations within the chess game, and so could not spare any more attention to other things.

The Yellow Browed Monk's next six moves were all according to Duan Yu's instructions. He did not need to use his energy to think of them, and only needed to exert his energy to draw the actual pieces on the board.

Correspondingly, the six circles which he drew with his steel hammer were extremely round and deep, giving him the appearance of being full of vigor and an unending source of energy. The man in green, seeing that each of these six moves were more powerful than the previous, was forced to ponder deeply in order to defend against each one of them. He was totally forced to the defensive, and the indentations which his steel canes made began to show some differences in depth. After the Yellow Browed Monk played his sixth piece, the man in green simply sat there for a long moment. Then, suddenly, he played a piece in the 'Ru' quadrant.

This move was strange to the extreme. It was completely different from what Duan Yu had anticipated. The Yellow Browed Monk was stunned. He thought to himself, "This seven-step strategy of Mr. Duan was carefully devised and perfect in the details. By the time I laid down the seventh piece, I would have advanced from being one move ahead to being two moves ahead. But now, I'll no longer be able to make the seventh move. All my previous efforts were wasted."

As it happened, the man in green saw that the battleground was becoming more and more disadvantageous to him. No matter what defense he might use, he would still be in trouble. So instead, he decided to ignore the threat to his own pieces, and attack the opponent's pieces in a different area instead. This was known as "defending without defending". Truly, it was a formidable move. Furrowing his forehead, the Yellow Browed Monk tried to devise a good reply.

[Translator's thoughts: Brilliant! It looks like Dugu Nine Jian applies not only to martial arts, but also to chess!]

Pochen saw the sudden change in the battlefield of chess pieces and that his master's pieces were once again in great danger. He immediately ran next to the stone house. Duan Yu had long ago come up with a strategy, and wrote six countermoves on Pochen's palm, one after the other. Pochen

then rushed back to the Yellow Browed Monk's side, once more writing down the moves on his master's back.

The man in green was known as "The Most Evil Man in the World." How could he possibly ignore his opponent's constant cheating and trickery? He stretched out his left steel cane, pointing it at Pochen's shoulder. He shouted, "Junior disciple, stand farther back!" And as he pointed, a 'chi' sound emanated from the cane.

The Yellow Browed Monk saw that his disciple wouldn't be able to resist the enemy's power, and that it would be difficult for him to avoid sustaining a heavy injury. He thrust out his own left palm in a snatching attack towards the cane. The man in green's cane trembled, then pointed towards the acupoint beneath the left side of the monk's chest. The Yellow Browed Monk turned the snatching attack into a chopping attack on the cane. But once again, the steel cane changed position.

In the blink of an eye, the two had exchanged over eight stances. The Yellow Browed Monk thought to himself that his arm couldn't reach long enough. He struck with his finger at the steel cane. The man in green didn't budge a single step, and the monk's finger and the steel cane touched. Both of them generated their power and began to compete in internal energy. Immediately, the steel cane and the monk's fingers came to a halt, neither of them moving in the slightest.

The man in green said, "Master, it is your move. You have delayed for so very long now. Are you preparing to forfeit?" The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "Sir, you are an elite master of a senior generation. Why would you launch a sneak attack against my disciple? I'm afraid you really are lowering your own status!" With his right hand, the monk drew another small circle on the blue stone with his steel hammer. The man in green didn't even take time to think. With a casual wave of his hand, he made his own move. And so, their left hands remained locked in a fierce internal

energy competition, with neither side daring to slacken off in the slightest. Their right hands continued to play chess. Each side continued to advance their own pieces, continuing to counter each move of the other.

Five years ago, the Yellow Browed Monk had pled on the behalf of the commoners of Dali, asking Emperor Baoding to abolish the salt tax. Only now did Emperor Baoding agree. The two of them had reached a tacit understanding that the Yellow Browed Monk would rescue Duan Yu in Emperor Baoding's place. The Yellow Browed Monk thought to himself, "It is of little consequence if I lose my life. But if I cannot rescue Duan Yu, how can I possibly face my worthy brother, Zhengming?"

When martial arts exponents were cultivating their internal energy, they couldn't allow themselves to be distracted in the slightest. This is what is described as "Reflecting the brilliance of emptiness, forgetting both myself and the world." But in playing chess, one must strive to outdo someone else. Each game of chess had three hundred and sixty one possible moves, and every single move had to be carefully contemplated. It truly did require that one calculate out every minor detail, and haggle over every minor point. These two principles were directly opposite to each other, highly incompatible. Although the Yellow Browed Monk was a master at chant meditation, his skills in chess were inferior to his opponent. While secretly generating internal energy to resist the opponent, he neglected the game. If he focused on the game of chess instead, he would find himself disadvantaged in the internal energy competition. It seemed as though today, he found himself in an inextricably dangerous and strange situation. His only option was to die fighting, so as to repay his bosom friend. His own safety was no longer a concern for him. As the ancients said, "An army burning with righteousness is guaranteed victory." But although the Yellow Browed Monk

certainly was filled with righteousness, the words 'guaranteed' and 'victory' really did not apply.

The three ministers of Dali, 'Minister of Education' Hua Hegen, 'Minister of War' Fan Hua, and 'Minister of Soil and Water' Ba Tianshi, led thirty subordinates who possessed martial arts in their expedition. They brought along timber, shovels, kongming lanterns, and other tools, and snuck into the forest at the back of the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. After selecting a suitable location, they began to dig the tunnel. The thirty three men dug for an entire night, tunneling out a passageway that was several hundred feet long. The following day, they continued to dig, all the way until late afternoon. They calculated that they shouldn't be too far from the stone house. Hua Hegen ordered his subordinates to withdraw and dispose of the dirt, leaving only the three of them as they continued to dig. They knew that Crown Prince Yanqing's martial arts were extremely profound, and so they dug as quietly as possible, not daring to make even the slightest of sounds. Under the circumstances, their forward progress slowed greatly. They didn't know that at this moment, Crown Prince Yanqing was exhausting all of his energy and concentration in competing in both chess and internal energy with the Yellow Browed Monk. There was no chance that he might hear them digging a tunnel.

They continued to dig until the 'shenpai' hour [3 PM to 5 PM], then stopped, calculating that they should be beneath Duan Yu. They were now no more than ten feet away from Crown Prince Yanqing. Consequently, it was now all the more important for them to proceed with caution. They definitely could not risk making a single sound. Hua Hegen put down his iron shovel and began to dig using his ten fingers. He executed his 'Exceeding Claw Skill', and his ten fingers became much akin to a pair of steel claws, tearing through large chunks of dirt. Fan Hua and Ba Tianshi stood behind him, taking the dirt which his claws dislodged and disposing

of it. At this point in time, Hua Hegen was no longer digging forwards; rather, he had begun to dig upwards. The architectural feat had been completed. But as to whether or not Duan Yu could be rescued, they would find out very soon. All three of them couldn't help but have their heart's beat faster.

Digging upwards was a much less taxing proposition than digging forwards. Once the dirt and mud was loosened, they would fall down of their own accord. After Hua Hegen had dug sufficiently upwards to allow himself to straighten his body, his digging speed increased even further. After digging for a while, he would stop and listen carefully, trying to hear any movement above him. In such a manner, he dug for the length of time which might take two joss sticks to burn down. By then, he judged that he could be no more than a foot away from the surface. He dug even more slowly now. As he gently brushed aside the remaining mud and dirt, his hand came into contact with a flat wooden plank. He was ecstatic. "So the stone house has a wooden floor. That makes it much easier to deal with."

Pouring power into his fingers, he slowly carved out a two-foot long square in the wooden board. He then withdrew the support his free hand had been providing the wooden plank, and the wooden square lightly fell down, creating an aperture which a single person could easily pass through. Hua Hegen lifted up his iron shovel, waving it in a circle above the floor in order to guard against a sneak attack. Suddenly, he heard a loud 'ah' sound, as a female voice screamed loudly.

Hua Hegen said in a low voice, "Miss Mu, don't scream. I'm a friend. I'm here to rescue you." With a leap, he jumped out of the hole.

But when he saw the insides of the room, he was hugely startled. What type of 'stone house' was this? The room was bright and clean, and all sorts of bottles and jars covered every single cabinet and table. A young girl with a terrified

expression on her face was standing in one corner. Hua Hegen immediately knew that he had miscalculated, and dug into the wrong place. The location of the stone house was only known by Emperor Baoding, who had described it to Ba Tianshi, who in turn described it to him. Afraid of being caught, he hadn't dared to personally inspect the terrain. Operating on the basis of thirdhand information, he hadn't been too far off, but nonetheless a huge error had been made.

Hua Hegen had dug himself directly into Zhong Wanchou's house. That young girl was Zhong Ling. She was in the process of rummaging through her father's belongings, trying to find the antidote for Duan Yu. All of a sudden, a big man suddenly jumped up out of the floor. How could she not be terrified?

Hua Hegen's thoughts moved quickly. "Since we dug to the wrong place, we'll have to start digging anew. I've already left behind traces of my passing. If I kill this girl in order to silence her, after finding her corpse Zhong Wanchou will certainly search the area. He'll find me before I can manage to tunnel my way to the stone house. The only option is to temporarily take her into the tunnel. If others go looking for her, they'll definitely search outside of the gorge."

But at this very moment, footsteps could be heard outside the room as someone walked nearby. Hua Hegen waved his hands towards Zhong Ling, signifying that she wasn't to cause a disturbance. Turning his body, he extended his left leg towards the hole, as though he were preparing to go back down. But suddenly, he spun around and leapt towards Zhong Ling, covering her mouth with his left hand while hugging her around the waist with his right. He carried her within the hole, passing her downwards. Fan Hua received Zhong Ling from Hua Hegen, then grabbed a big handful of mud and covered her mouth with it. Hua Hegen jumped back into the tunnel, then placed the wooden

square which he had cut out back to its original position. Pressing his ears against the cracks, he listened to any sounds which might come from above.

He heard the sound of two people walking into the room. A male voice said, "You must have lingering affection for him. Otherwise, why would you keep on trying to prevent me from ruining the reputation of the Duan family?" A displeased female voice replied, "What 'lingering' affection are you babbling about? I never had any affection for him to begin with." The male voice said, "If that's true, I couldn't be happier. Excellent, excellent!" Utter happiness was in his voice. The woman said, "However, Miss Mu is my martial sister's daughter. She's one of our people. How can you mistreat her so?"

By now, Hua Hegen had already realized that the two people speaking had to be gorge-master Zhong and his wife. Hearing that the topic of their conversation had to do with Duan Yu, he became all the more attentive in his eavesdropping.

He heard Zhong Wanchou say, "Your martial sister wanted to sneakily release Duan Yu. Fortunately, she was discovered by Ye Erniang. Your martial sister is already one of our enemies. Why care about her daughter? Wife, the people who are now at our halls are all famous members of Dali's wulin community. But you didn't pay the slightest attention to them. You walked into the room, widened your eyes, and glared at them. Isn't that a little...a bit...eh, not polite." Madame Zhong angrily replied, "What's the point of you inviting those fellows into our house? We don't have much of a relationship with any of them. Do you think they will dare offend the Emperor of Dali for our behalf?"

Zhong Wanchou said, "I didn't invite them here for the purpose of asking them to loan us their fists in battle and rebel against Duan Zhengming. As it happened, they all were present within Dali. I invited them here to drink wine and serve as witnesses for what will happen. Duan

Zhengchun's own son has shared a room with his own sister and engaged in licentious, incestuous acts, as though they were animals. The guests that I invited today even include some heroes from the Central Plains to our north. Early tomorrow morning, we'll open the door to the stone house and give everybody something to see. The heir of the Duan family's 'Solitary Solar Finger', in such a state...won't that be so very amusing? Won't this be spread far and wide throughout the jianghu?" As he spoke, he began to laugh loudly, utterly delighted.

Madame Zhong let out a 'heng' sound. "Contemptible and despicable! Brazen and shameless!" Zhong Wanchou said, "Who are you cursing as being despicable and shameless?" Madame Zhong said, "Whoever performs despicable and shameless acts is a despicable and shameless person. There's no need for me to curse them as being such!" Zhong Wanchou said, "Right! That evil fellow, Duan Zhengchun, describes himself as being a dissolute playboy, and has brought many sins upon his own head. In the end, his own children will fall in love and engage in an illicit sexual relationship. He really is extremely despicable and shameless!" Madame Zhong let out a cold smile, but did not respond. Zhong Wanchou asked, "Why did you just smile coldly like that? Can it be that those two words, 'despicable' and 'shameless', were not directed towards Duan Zhengchun?"

Madame Zhong smiled coldly again. "You aren't able to overcome the Duan family with your own abilities, and hide yourself here in this gorge, not daring to show yourself. Fine, whatever. As the saying goes, knowing how to avoid being shamed is something akin to courage. This is still something which a man might do. But I never would have imagined that you would use such despicable means to manipulate his children instead. The heroes of the world won't be laughing at him, no. They will be laughing at you! Zhong Wanchou!"

Zhong Wanchou leapt to his feet. He angrily said, "You're calling ME shameless and despicable?"

Tears flowed down Madame Zhong's face. Her voice choked with sobs, she said, "I didn't imagine that the husband whom I married, the good man to whom I entrusted my entire being, would be...would be a person like this. I....I...my life is so bitter!"

Seeing his wife cry, Zhong Wanchou couldn't help but be flustered. "Fine. Fine! If you want to curse at me, then curse at me as much as you want!" He stalked back and forth across the room. He wanted to offer his wife some sort of apology, but couldn't immediately think of anything appropriate to say. Finally, he said, "This wasn't my idea! Duan Yu was captured by the Divine Crocodile. Mu Wanqing was seized by 'Evil Beyond Human Capacity'. The 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder belongs to him as well. How could I use such a despicable and shameless sort of drug?" At the moment, he wanted to disavow all responsibility. Madame Zhong laughed coldly. "As long as you know what the words 'despicable' and 'shameless' mean. If you don't approve of this idea, then you should release Miss Mu." Zhong Wanchou said, "That won't work, that won't work. If I release Mu Wanqing, what type of performance can Duan Yu put on by himself?"

Madame Zhong said, "Fine! If you want to be despicable and shameless, I'm going to do something despicable and shameless as well for you to see!" Zhong Wanchou was startled, and hurriedly asked, "You...you...what are you going to do?" Madame Zhong let out a 'heng' sound. "Just go imagine it by yourself." In a trembling voice, Zhong Wanchou said, "You...are you going to find Duan Zhengchun...find Duan Zhengchun, that evil thief, and commit adultery with him again?" Madame Zhong angrily roared, "What do you mean, AGAIN?" Zhong Wanchou hurriedly laughed. "Wife, don't be angry. I misspoke. Of course you never...never...never did that with him. When

you said you would do something despicable and shameless for me to watch, that was...that was just a joke. Right?" But Madame Zhong did not respond.

Zhong Wanchou's mind was greatly disturbed. Casting his gaze wildly about the room, he saw that all the bottles and jars were all jumbled about. He said, "Humph. What a mischievous kid Zhong Ling is. At her tender age, she actually came and asked me about the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder. Where did she hear about it, anyhow? Now she came here and made a mess of things." As he spoke, he went into the room and began to straighten and reorganize the medicine cabinets. One foot strode on top of the piece of wood which had been cut away earlier. Hua Hegen hurriedly exerted his strength to keep the piece of wood from collapsing, in order to prevent Zhong Wanchou from discovering them.

Madame Zhong said, "Where is Ling'er, anyhow? Where'd she go? Why did you need to take her to the grand hall to meet the guests, anyhow?" Zhong Wanchou laughed. "The two of us made such a beautiful little girl together. How can I not introduce her to my friends?" Madame Zhong said, "What, are you a monkey showing off your treasure? I saw the wicked look in the eyes of that Yun Zhonghe fellow as he stared nonstop at our daughter. You need to be careful." Zhong Wanchou laughed. "I only need to be careful about you. You are a lovely woman with the complexion of a flower and are as beautiful as the moon. Who wouldn't be scheming to steal you away?"

Madame Zhong spat, then shouted, "Ling'er! Ling'er!" A serving girl walked towards her. "The young miss was just here a moment ago." Madame Zhong nodded. "Go find that young lady. I have something to tell her."

Underneath the floor and within the tunnel, Zhong Ling clearly heard every single word her parents exchanged. Unfortunately, there was no way for her to respond. Her

heart was filled with fear, and in addition, her mouth was covered with mud, making her feel even worse.

Zhong Wanchou said, "Take a rest. I'll go keep our guests company." An icy expression on her face, Madame Zhong coldly replied, "Why don't you rest instead. I'll go keep them company." Zhong Wanchou said, "Let's go together." Madame Zhong said, "The guests want to see my 'flower-like complexion' and my 'moon-like beauty'. Why would they be interested in seeing your long, horse-like face? One day, even I'll be tired of seeing that face, and then you'll know how it feels."

These past few days, Zhong Wanchou had been getting blamed for everything he did. No matter what he said, his wife would abruptly ridicule him. He clearly saw that after his wife had met with Duan Zhengchun again, old passions once more began to rise in her thoughts. Even though he was unhappy, he never dared to snap back at her. He could only let out a laugh then walk towards the great hall. While walking, he thought to himself, "She's going to do something shameful and despicable for me to see? Then she said that one day, even she'll be sick of seeing my face. Hmm. That means, she isn't sick of seeing my face yet. Things aren't so very bad! I'm just worried about Duan Zhengchun, that thieving scoundrel..."

Chapter 9: The Luan and Feng Who Exchange Nests

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

[Luan is the male counterpart to the female feng, which is commonly translated as 'phoenix'. The phrase 'luan and feng' thus is a reference to a husband and wife.]

Upon hearing that Emperor Baoding had abolished the salt tariff, the tens of thousands of citizens of Dali felt extremely grateful. Yunnan did not produce a great deal of salt. Throughout the country, only the cities of Baijing, Heijing, Yulong, and six others produced salt. Every year, they would need to import salt from Shu [modern day Sichuan]. The salt tariff was extremely heavy, often forcing many of the poorer citizens at the outlying regions of the country to go without. Emperor Baoding knew that as soon as he abolished the salt tariff, the Yellow Browed Monk would certainly try to think of a way to rescue Duan Yu, so as to show his gratitude.

He had always admired the Yellow Browed Monk's intelligence and martial arts, and also knew that the monk's two disciples were not weak either. With the three of them working together, they would certainly achieve victory. Much to his surprise, after waiting an entire day and an entire night, he hadn't received any news of success at all. He was just about to send out Ba Tianshi to investigate when he discovered that Ba Tianshi, Minister of Education Hua, and Minister of War Fan had all disappeared as well.

Emperor Baoding pondered to himself, "Can it be that Crown Prince Yanqing truly is this formidable? Can it really be possible that the Yellow Browed Monk, his two disciples, and my three ministers have all fallen to him within the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge?" He immediately sent for his

Imperial Crown Brother Duan Zhengchun, the South-Subduing Prince, Dao Baifeng, the Marquis of Virtuous Enlightenment Gao Shengtai, and the Four Imperial Bodyguards to once more make their way to the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge.

Her heart aching for her beloved son, Dao Baifeng asked Emperor Baoding to call out the imperial army and totally oblivate the gorge. Emperor Baoding replied, "Unless we're completely out of all other options, we must act in accordance with the customs and rules of the jianghu. The centuries-old instructions of the Duan family ancestors cannot be cast aside."

The party arrived at the entrance to the gorge, only to see Yun Zhonghe approach them with a little smile on his face. Cupping his hands politely, he said in a deep voice, "We Four Evils and gorge-master Zhong anticipated that you, sir, would once more honor us with your presence today. I have been respectfully waiting for you here for a long time. If you have brought your armored soldiers here, we will simply escape, taking with us your beloved son and your precious daughter. But if you have come here in accordance with the rules of the jianghu, intending to greet friends based upon your martial ability, then please enter the main lounge and enjoy some tea."

Emperor Baoding saw that he was extremely calm and showed not a single hint of fear, acting in a manner far different from the previous day, where he had immediately rushed out and launched an attack. This made him feel all the more alarmed. Instantly, he cupped his hands as well. "It couldn't be better if that is truly the case." Yun Zhonghe escorted the party inside the lounge. Upon stepping foot within, Emperor Baoding saw that the room was filled with heroes of the jianghu. Ye Erniang and the Divine Crocodile were there as well, but Crown Prince Yanqing was nowhere to be seen. Once again, he secretly prepared for the worst.

Yun Zhonghe cried out loudly, "Master Duan, the head of the Duan family of the southern skies has arrived!" He didn't use the phrase, 'His majesty, the Emperor of Dali', but rather introduced him in accordance with his wulin title, showing that everything would proceed in accordance with the rules of the jianghu.

Not only was Duan Zhengming the ruler of a country, but he was also an extremely esteemed expert in the wulin, of great prestige and stature. As soon as the crowd heard that he had arrived, they all immediately rose to their feet. Only the Divine Crocodile remained sitting. He loudly shouted, "I was wondering who showed up. So it's the ole emperor, eh? How ya doing?"

Zhong Wanchou quickly rushed forward and said, "I, Zhong Wanchou, did not come to welcome a distant guest. Please forgive me." Emperor Baoding said, "You're too polite, too polite."

Presently, everyone retook their seats. Their positions were in accordance with the rules of the jianghu. Duan Zhengchun, his wife, and Gao Shengtai no longer needed to act in accordance with the rules governing how a subject should behave in front of his ruler, and so sat next to Emperor Baoding. Chu Wanli and the other three guards stood behind Emperor Baoding.

Servants of the gorge came to them, offering them tea. Emperor Baoding, seeing that the Yellow Browed Monk, Ba Tianshi, and the others were not here, was busy formulating a way which would allow him to inquire about their whereabouts. Suddenly, he heard Zhong Wanchou speak. "Master Duan, you've really given me a huge amount of face! It's so seldom that so many good friends would be gathered in one place. Come, let me introduce them to you."

Following this, he began to introduce the other guests one by one. Some were heroes from the Central Plains to the north. The rest were all outstanding members of Dali's wulin community. They included Xin Shuangqing, Zuo Zimu, and

Ma Wude amongst others. Emperor Baoding had never met most of the people present, but had heard of their names. These heroes of the jianghu all respectively paid their respects to Emperor Baoding. Some were extremely respectful; others intentionally acted arrogantly. Others addressed him using the language that a wulin person who was of a junior generation to him might use.

Zhong Wanchou said, "It is a rare thing for Master Duan to come here. Why not stay here for a few additional days? That way, you could get to know all the friends here better." Emperor Baoding replied, "It would be enough if you could pardon Duan Yu for his offense, gorge master Zhong. He has been detained at your noble residence. Today, I have come here for two reasons. Firstly, to ask for clemency on his behalf. Secondly, to offer my apologies. Gorge master Zhong, I hope that you will give me some face and forgive the ignorance of the child. I will be extremely grateful."

Upon hearing his words, everyone secretly felt admiration for him. They thought to themselves, "We've long heard that Emperor Duan acts in accordance with the rules of the wulin. His reputation is well earned. This place falls within the borders of the country of Dali. He only needs to send out a few hundred cavalymen and would immediately be able to take his nephew back. Who would have thought that he would come in person, and instead ask in such respectful language?"

Zhong Wanchou laughed loudly, but did not immediately respond. Ma Wude said, "Ah, so Duan Yu offended gorge master Zhong. Some time ago, he went to the city of Pu'er, then went sight-seeing with me and my brothers at Mt. Wuliang. I didn't take good care of him, and this was the cause of so many problems. I would also like to request clemency on his behalf."

The Divine Crocodile suddenly shouted loudly, "What right do you have to meddle in the affairs of my apprentice?!" Gao Shengtai said coldly, "The young lord

Duan is your master. You've even knelt down and kowtowed to him. Are you reneging on that?" The Divine Crocodile's entire face turned red. He cursed, "**** your grandmother. I'm not reneging! Today, I'm going to kill the brat who is my master only in name. I wasn't careful and somehow ended up accepting that brat as my master. I'm dying of shame!"

No one in the crowd knew what he was talking about, and each and every one of them was flabbergasted.

Dao Baifeng said, "Gorge master Zhong, whether or not Duan Yu will be released lies in a single word from you." Zhong Wanchou laughed. "Release, release, release! Of course I will release him! What good does it do me to keep your honorable son?" Yun Zhonghe interjected, "Duan Yu is romantic and handsome. Madame Zhong, the 'Lovely Yaksha', is an extremely beautiful woman. To keep him within the gorge would be like leading a wolf into a sheep pen, or like raising a tiger with your children. Naturally, gorge master Zhong will release him. He can't help but release him. He doesn't dare not release him!"

Upon hearing these words, everyone present was startled. They realized that this 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' Yun Zhonghe spoke without the slightest scruples, as though he really didn't give a damn about gorge master Zhong. His nickname, 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil', really was not mistakenly given.

Zhong Wanchou was furious. Turning his head, he said, "Brother Yun, after finishing the business at hand, I would like to experience your brilliant moves!" Yun Zhonghe replied, "Wonderful, wonderful! I've long wanted to kill the husband, seize the wife, then settle down within this gorge."

The face of every person present turned pale. Xin Shuangqing, lady of the Wuliang Cave, spoke. "The good and noble heroes of the world haven't been exterminated. No matter how high the martial arts of you 'Four Evils' are, you won't escape justice in the end!" In a coquettish,

delicate voice, Ye Erniang said, "Daoist friend Xin, I, Ye Erniang, haven't offended you. Why rope me in with him?"

Zuo Zimu, suddenly recalling how she had abducted his son, couldn't help but have lingering fears. He snuck a sideways glance at her. Ye Erniang laughed. "Mr. Zuo, your little boy must be even fatter and cuter now, right?" Zuo Zimu didn't dare to not respond. He said in a low voice, "Last time, he was exposed to the cold. He hasn't fully recovered from the illness yet." Ye Erniang laughed again. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's all my fault. Later, when I have a chance, I'll head over to your mountain and pay a visit to my cute little grandson." Zuo Zimu was terrified. He quickly replied, "I wouldn't dare to trouble you to come."

Emperor Baoding thought to himself, "These Four Evils have perpetrated many atrocities and committed many outrages. Many people have formed grudges and enmities against them. These jianghu heroes clearly aren't their allies. This makes things much more easier to handle. After rescuing Yu'er, I should take the chance to eliminate these evil people. Although the leader of the Four Evils, Crown Prince Yanqing, is a member of the Duan family, making it inappropriate for me to personally deal with him, there will still be a day when he truly is called to account for his monstrous crimes [another possible meaning of the title, 'E Guan Man Ying']."

Dao Baifeng, hearing everyone speak, saw that the conversation was getting derailed. She suddenly stood up. "Gorge master Zhong, as you have agreed to return my son, please return him to me and let the two of us, mother and son, meet."

Zhong Wanchou also stood up. "Alright!" Suddenly turning his head, he shot a glance towards Duan Zhengchun. He sighed. "Duan Zhengchun, you have such a wonderful wife and son. Why aren't you satisfied and remain so greedy? Today, when your reputation is trampled underfoot and when you lose all face, you will have no one

to blame save yourself. You cannot blame me, Zhong Wanchou!"

Duan Zhengchun, after hearing that Zhong Wanchou was willing to release his son, immediately suspected some sort of conspiracy or trap, as he did not believe the matter would be settled so easily. Now, upon hearing Zhong Wanchou's words, he immediately stood up and walked to Zhong Wanchou's side. "Gorge master Zhong, if you have maliciously harmed him, then I assure you that I, Duan Zhengchun, will also have a method to make you bitterly repent your actions for the rest of your life."

Zhong Wanchou saw that he had a majestic appearance and an awe-inspiring presence, with a magnificent and lofty aura. He felt that he himself truly was vastly inferior to this man. A feeling of shame suddenly filled his chest, and it engendered a jealous flame in his heart. He loudly said, "Since things have already come to this point, I'm going to take this all the way to the end, even if the final result is that I become destitute and homeless, and have my corpse broken into a thousand pieces. If you want your son back, come with me!" And as he spoke, he strode away from the hall entrance.

The group of people followed Zhong Wanchou as he arrived at the giant tree wall. Yun Zhonghe, showing off his qinggong abilities, was the first to leap over the wall. Duan Zhengchun thought to himself, "We've almost reached the point of no return. We might as well demonstrate our power and prestige, so as to cause the other side to know how much disaster will be in store for them and perhaps retreat." He called out, "Ducheng, chop the tree down, so that everyone will find it easier to pass."

Gu Ducheng responded, "Yes sir!" He raised his steel hatchets. With a series of quick 'ca' sounds, he immediately chopped down one of the trees. Fu Sigui launched a twin palm attack on the tree. With a loud crash, it fell down to the side. The steel hatchet, gleaming with bright light,

continued to chop away. The chopping sounds went on non-stop, and the large trees were felled one after another in succession. In short time, all that could be seen were five tree stumps.

It had not been easy at all for Zhong Wanchou to plant and cultivate this wall of trees. He had labored mightily, and it had cost him a great deal of blood and sweat. After seeing them chopped down by Gu Ducheng, he couldn't help but become agitated and furious. But then he had second thoughts. "Today, the Duan family of Dali is going to lose a huge amount of face. Why quibble over such a small things as this?" He immediately walked past the cleared stumps.

Only to see that past the chopped down wall, the Yellow Browed Monk and Duan Yanqing were both pressing against a steel cane. A cloud of white mist hover over their heads, showing that they were in the middle of an internal energy competition. The Yellow Browed Monk suddenly stretched out his right hand and used a small steel hammer to draw a circle on a blue stone in front of him. The man in green thought for a moment, then stretched out his right steel cane and pressed it downwards on the blue stone. Staring at them, Emperor Baoding immediately realized that his martial brother, the Yellow Browed Monk, was competing in both chess and internal energy with Crown Prince Yanqing. It was a competition of both intelligence and strength. The competition was as fresh and original as it was deadly. He thought to himself, "He never gave me an update. It seems as though it is because this competition has been going on for one day and one night, without victory or defeat having been achieved.

Glancing at the chess game, he saw that the two sides were locked into a 'Life or Death Knot'. Victory and defeat would completely depend on the resolution of this knot. However, the Yellow Browed Monk was in the weaker position, barely keeping his pieces alive with strenuous effort. His two disciples, Pochi and Pochen, had fallen

unmoving to the ground. Earlier, upon seeing their master in a critical situation, had attacked the man in green from both sides in a pincer attack. But both of them had been felled by his steel cane.

Duan Zhengchun walked forward and unsealed their acupoints. "Wanli, you four go and push aside the stone and rescue Yu'er." Chu Wanli and the other three replied in the affirmative and walked forwards as well.

Zhong Wanchou called out, "Wait! Do you know who else, in addition to Duan Yu, is in this stone house?" Duan Zhengchun angrily said, "If you used ruthless tricks to coerce my son, then you should remember that you yourself have a wife and daughter!" With a cold expression on his face, Zhong Wanchou laughed. "Right on. I, Zhong Wanchou, do indeed have both a wife and a daughter. Fortunately, I don't have a son, much less a son who will engage in depraved, incestuous acts with his own sister." Duan Zhengchun's face turned ashen. He called out, "You're full of crap! What are you babbling about?" Zhong Wanchou said, "Mu Wanqing is your daughter, is she not?" Duan Zhengchun angrily replied, "What business is it of yours as to what her origins or family are, you busybody?"

Zhong Wanchou laughed. "I'm not necessarily a busybody. Dali's Duan family serve as the rulers of the southern world and dominate it. Your name is also famous and prestigious within the wulin. Heroes and noble men present! Open wide your eyes and watch as Duan Zhengchun's son and daughter become husband and wife, fornicating like animals. He made a hand signal towards the Divine Crocodile, and the two of them prepared to push aside the boulder which was blocking the door.

Duan Zhengchun called out, "Wait!" He extended his hands to halt them. But Yun Zhonghe and Ye Erniang each sent out a palm to attack him from two sides, forcing him to block. Slanting his body, Gao Shengtai surged forwards and blocked Yun Zhonghe's palm attack. But unexpectedly, both

Ye Erniang's attack and Yun Zhonghe's attacks were feints. Although they waved their right hands in a false attack, they simultaneously pressed their left palms against the boulder as well and exerted their force. That giant boulder weighed thousands of jin, but, faced with the combined efforts of Ye Erniang, Zhong Wanchou, Yun Zhonghe, and the Divine Crocodile, immediately rolled aside.

This trick was something which the four of them had long ago planned out. It was very difficult to discern, and there was no way for Duan Zhengchun to stop them. And, in all honesty, Duan Zhengchun was worried sick about his son, and thus didn't use all of his efforts to stop them from rolling the boulder aside. After the boulder was rolled aside, a doorway was exposed. The insides of the house was dim and dark, and the circumstances inside could not be seen.

Zhong Wanchou laughed. "A lonely man and a single woman, completely naked, together inside a dark room. What type of good things might they possibly be doing aside? Haha, haha. Everyone, take a good look!"

In the middle of Zhong Wanchou's laughter, a young man with tousled hair, naked from the waist up, walked out. He was only wearing a pair of shorts, exposing most of his legs as well. It was Duan Yu. In his arms, he held a woman. The woman cuddled into his arms. She, too, was only wearing her underwear, exposing her arms and her thighs, as well as much of the pure white flesh of her back.

Emperor Baoding's entire face was flooded with shame. Duan Zhengchun lowered his head, unable to look. Tears filled Dao Baifeng's eyes. She mumbled to herself, "Karma...this is karma..." Gao Shengtai removed his own gown, preparing to give it to Duan Yu to wear instead. Ma Wude, wholeheartedly trying to ingratiate himself with the two brothers of the Duan family, hurriedly stepped forward and stood in front of Duan Yu, concealing him. The Divine Crocodile called out, "Sonufab.itch, f.uck off!"

Extremely delighted, Zhong Wanchou continued to laugh loudly. Then, suddenly, his laughter came to an abrupt halt. He fell silent for a long moment, then let out a wretched shout. "Ling'er? Is that...is that you?"

Upon hearing his loud cry, the hearts of the entire crowd trembled. Zhong Wanchou suddenly pounced towards Duan Yu, snatching at the woman whom he was holding in his arms. At this time, everyone present could now see this girl's face. Her age was certainly younger than that of Mu Wanning, and her figure was also smaller and slimmer. A look of youthfulness remained on her face. It wasn't Mu Wanning. It was Zhong Wanchou's own daughter, Zhong Ling! When the group of heroes had first arrived at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, Zhong Wanchou had brought her to the grand hall to introduce her to the guests, with the intention of showing off his beautiful, adorable daughter.

Somewhat confused and bewildered, Duan Yu saw that there were many people in front of him. He recognized his uncle and his parents, and immediately released Zhong Ling, allowing Zhong Wanchou to take her away from him. He called out, "Mother! Uncle! Father!" Dao Baifeng rushed towards him, embracing him within her arms. "Yu'er, are you...are you alright?" Bewildered, Duan Yu replied, "I...I...I'm not sure."

Not only had Zhong Wanchou failed to harm his enemy, he had harmed himself instead. How could he have imagined that the woman whom Duan Yu carried out in his arms would actually be his own daughter? Dazed, he let go of his daughter. Zhong Ling was only wearing some form-hugging undergarments. Seeing so many eyes on her, her entire face blushed red. Zhong Wanchou took off his own gown, wrapping it around her, then slapped her on the face, causing her left cheeks to redden even more. He scolded her, "Shameless! Who told you to get together with that little swine?" Zhong Ling's face was a picture of grievance at

being falsely accused, and started to cry. How could she explain everything in such a short time?

Zhong Wanchou suddenly thought to himself, "Mu Wanning clearly was imprisoned within the stone house. I doubt she was able to push the boulder aside. She must be within the house still. I'll go drag her out and have her help shoulder some of the humiliation which Ling'er is suffering." He loudly cried out, "Miss Mu, hurry up and come out!" He called out three times, but heard no sound within the house.

Zhong Wanchou rushed inside the house. The stone room was only ten feet wide and long. It was obvious at first glance that there wasn't even a shadow of a person within. Zhong Wanchou was so angry that he felt as though his chest would explode. He left the room, then struck out with another palm towards his daughter. He screamed, "Stupid girl, I'm going to kill you!"

But suddenly, a hand stretched out from the side, with the ring finger and the little finger striking towards his wrist. Zhong Wanchou hurriedly withdrew his hand to escape the blow, then turned his head. The person who had interfered was Duan Zhengchun. He angrily said, "I'm teaching my daughter a lesson. What business is it of yours?"

Chuckling, Duan Zhengchun said, "Gorge master Zhong, you really treated my son incredibly well during his stay here! You were afraid that he would get lonely by himself, and ordered your precious daughter to come here and keep him company. I am incredibly grateful towards you. This being the case, your precious daughter is already a member of my Duan family. How can I not interfere?"

Zhong Wanchou roared, "How is she a member of your Duan family?" Duan Zhengchun laughed. "Within this stone room, your daughter attended to the needs of my son, Duan Yu. They've been together quite some time now. As you said. A lonely man and a single woman, completely naked, together inside a dark room. What type of good things might they possibly be doing aside? My son is the heir to the

South-Subduing Palace. Although he might not be able to take on your daughter as his chief wife, he can still take her on as a concubine. For the nobility, what's wrong with having three wives or four concubines? It looks like you and me have become in-laws! Ha ha ha ha, he he he!"

Zhong Wanchou was unable to suppress the violent rage which filled him, and rushed towards Duan Zhengchun. 'Hu', 'hu', 'hu'. He struck out with three palms. His laughter not stopping, Duan Zhengchun neutralized each of his attacks.

Everybody present thought to themselves, "Dali's Duan family really is formidable! I wonder what method they used to abscond with gorge master Zhong's daughter, then imprison her within the stone room. Zhong Wanchou is a citizen of Dali, but repeatedly sets himself against the Duan family and stirs up trouble for them. Isn't he really asking for trouble?"

As it happened, this entire scene was planned out by Hua Hegen and the other two. After kidnapping Zhong Ling and taking her down into the tunnel, Hua Hegen's original idea was to simply prevent her from leaking out their plans. Only after hearing Zhong Wanchou and his wife speak did he realize that Zhong Wanchou and Crown Prince Yanqing had created such a devious, ruthless plan to destroy the reputation of the Duan family. The three of them discussed the situation in a low voice within the tunnel. All three of them knew that this was a matter of the gravest importance. Moreover, time was of the essence. As soon as Madame Zhong left, Ba Tianshi quietly left the tunnel and scouted out the area. He found the exact location of and distance to the stone house, and informed Hua Hegen. All of them sped up their excavating pace. They were busy for yet another night, digging until dawn break. Only then did they arrive at the stone house.

Hua Hegen dug his way into the stone house, only to see Duan Yu running around the room madly, as though he had gone insane. He stretched out his hand to grab him, but

Duan Yu's movements were both fast and bizarre, and he wasn't able to get a hold of him. Ba Tianshi and Fan Hua also entered the room and surrounded Duan Yu. The room really was too small, and there was nowhere Duan Yu might go. Hua Hegen stretched out his hand and grabbed Duan Yu's wrist, but his entire body immediately shook. He felt as though he had grabbed onto a hot coal. He quickly tugged hard, trying to knock Duan Yu into the tunnel so that they might quickly escape. But as soon as he exerted his strength, he felt his internal energy flow out of him and into Duan Yu. He couldn't keep from uttering a startled 'aiyo'.

Ba Tianshi and Fan Hua grabbed him and pulled at him hard. Only with their combined efforts did they manage to separate the two and shake off the internal-energy leeching 'Divine Art of the Northern Darkness'. The internal energy of the three chief ministers of Dali was much greater than that of the Wuliang disciples, and they had reacted more quickly as well. Only for this reason were they spared. Their bodies were covered with cold sweat. They thought to themselves, "The heretical skills of Crown Prince Yanqing truly are formidable!" They no longer dared to touch Duan Yu's body.

Just as they were at a loss as to what to do, they heard voices from outside the room. They realized that both Emperor Baoding and the South-Subduing Prince had arrived, and heard Zhong Wanchou's loud mockery. Fan Hua suddenly was struck by a brainwave. "Zhong Wanchou is hateful and vile. Let's play a big prank on him!" He immediately stripped off much of Zhong Ling's outer garments, then dressed Mu Wanqing with them. Then, he put Zhong Ling in Duan Yu's arms. Duan Yu dazedly accepted her. Hua Hegen and the other two grabbed Mu Wanqing then returned to the tunnel, covering the hole as they left, not leaving behind the slightest bit of evidence that they had ever been there.

Emperor Baoding saw that his nephew was totally fine. He would never have imagined that things would have

turned out this way. He was both gratified and amused. For the moment, he wasn't able to think of the reason why this all happened. He suddenly remembered that the Yellow Browed Monk and Duan Yanqing had reached a critical juncture of life and death in their internal energy competition. If they were disturbed in the slightest, their lives would immediately be in danger. He quickly walked back to the two men and their competition. Beads of sweat the size of a pea were rolling down the Yellow Browed Monk's head, falling down onto the chessboard below. But Crown Prince Yanqing sat there nonchalantly, the expression on his face unchanged, as though nothing had happened at all. Clearly, victory and defeat had already been determined.

Duan Yu's mind slowly became clearer. He was also concerned about the outcome of the chess match, and walked over to stand next to the two men. He saw that the Yellow Browed Monk's resources were exhausted. Crown Prince Yanqing would only need to make one more indentation, and the Yellow Browed Monk would be out of moves and would be forced to admit defeat. He saw Crown Prince Yanqing extend his steel cane, preparing to push down on the chess board. The place he was pointing at was precisely the critical point of the match. After making this move, there would be nothing more that the Yellow Browed Monk could do at all.

Duan Yu was extremely worried. He thought to himself, "Let me go muddle up the situation a bit." He stretched out his hand and grabbed at the cane. Just as Crown Prince Yanqing's steel cane was about to press down at the 'Shang' quadrant, where the third vertical and seventh horizontal line intersected, he felt a shock in his arm. The energy from his right arm, which was as tightly wound and directed as a bowstring, suddenly was diverted and flew away from him.

The sense of startlement he felt was not small. Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Duan Yu had grabbed onto the tip of his cane. Duan Yu had only wanted

to pull the steel cane aside and prevent him from striking the critical point in the chess match, but the steel cane, hovering in midair, didn't even budge. He immediately exerted as much force as he could, and Crown Prince Yanqing's internal energy suddenly entered his body via his 'Shaoshang' acupoint.

Greatly startled, Crown Prince Yanqing thought to himself, "It's the 'Energy Dissolving Art' [Hua Gong Fa] of that old freak Ding from Xingxiuhai [a plateau in Qinhai]." He immediately gathered his internal energy within his dantian, then transferred it to his arm. An incomparably powerful burst of energy erupted from his steel cane, shaking off Duan Yu's fingers.

Duan Yu only felt half his body go sore, and wanted to faint. His body trembled, and only by gripping the blue stone in front of him did he manage to stabilize himself. But a small part of that violent burst of energy from Crown Prince Yanqing had entered the ocean of energy within Duan Yu's dantian, then disappeared. Crown Prince Yanqing was greatly startled, and his steel cane drooped downwards slightly. The tip of it just so happened to precisely alight upon the 'Shang' quadrant, at the point where the seventh vertical and eighth horizontal lines connected.

After Duan Yu's interference, his internal energy did not flow smoothly. Although his steel cane sagged, it still carried a tremendous force and he involuntarily pressed downwards. Crown Prince Yanqing secretly cried out, "Not good!" He hurriedly lifted his cane, but at the point where the seventh vertical and eighth horizontal lines intersected, a small indentation had already appeared.

When experts played chess, they had to make sure that they would not regret making even a single mistaken move. Much less in this game, a large stone was the chessboard and indentations and circles served as the pieces. How could a move be taken back? But the move he had just made, at the point where the seventh and eighth lines intersected,

was where one of his 'eyes' were. As anyone who knows even a little bit about chess would know, having a safe pocket of two eyes meant those pieces were safe, but a single eye by itself was doomed. Crown Prince Yanqing had long ago turned that part of the board into a pocket of two eyes, making it a safe base of operations from which he could launch attacks at the Yellow Browed Monk's pieces. What sense would there be for him to kill one of his own eyes and doom his position? And yet, he had already made the move. Although it was totally counter to the logic of chess, the move was made due to his own internal energy being weakened and unstable.

Crown Prince Yanqing secretly sighed. "A single failed move will result in defeat across the entire playing field. Is this truly the will of heaven?" He was a person of extraordinarily high status and dignity. He definitely would not get into a dispute with the Yellow Browed Monk over this matter. He immediately rose up, pressing both of his hands down against the blue stone chessboard, staring at it and not moving for a long time.

Most of the heroes present had never seen him before. Upon noticing his strange appearance, everyone's attention was drawn towards him. He stared at the chessboard for a long time. Suddenly, without saying a word, he propped himself up with his steel canes. Their tips pressed against the earth as though he was stepping on the ground. Each step he took was very large, and he quickly departed.

Suddenly, a series of cracking sounds could be heard. The blue stone trembled, then split into six or seven pieces. And so this brilliant game of chess, the likes of had never been seen before and which might never be seen again, was erased from the world. The group of people couldn't help but let out cries of surprise. Aside from Emperor Baoding, the Yellow Browed Monk, and the three remaining Evils, everyone present thought to themselves, "That person seemed neither like a human being, nor like a ghost. That

living corpse who wore green had such an amazing level of martial arts.”

The Yellow Browed monk managed to win this game of chess by sheer chance. Both of his hands rested against his knees, and he himself was entranced in a daze as he replayed the thrilling events in his mind. He couldn't understand at all why Crown Prince Yanqing, just as victory was within his reach, would suddenly harm his own side and seal off one of his own eyes. Could it be that upon seeing Duan Zhengming and other experts arrive, he feared coming under attack and thus conceded the match? But he had many helpers on his side as well. He wouldn't necessarily have been defeated.

Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun, and Gao Shengtai also did not understand what had happened. But luckily, Duan Yu had been safely recovered, and the pure name of the Duan family was not damaged in the slightest. With Crown Prince Yanqing having conceded the match, a total victory had been achieved. Although there were many details of this encounter which they did not understand, at the moment it was not necessary to thoroughly investigate everything.

Duan Zhengchun smiled towards Zhong Wanchou. “Gorge master Zhong, now that your daughter has become my son's concubine, in the coming days, I will send someone to escort her to our palace. We will naturally take good care of these two lovebirds and treat her as though she were our own daughter. Set your mind at ease.”

Zhong Wanchou was already in the middle of an uncontrollable fury. Upon hearing Duan Zhengchun speak in such a mocking tone towards him, he pulled out his sabre with a ‘shua’ sound and chopped at Zhong Ling's head with a loud shout. “I'm dying of anger! I'm going to kill you first!”

But suddenly, a long shadow flashed by. With matchless speed, it seized Zhong Ling, then it flew away like a gust of wind, floating tens of feet away. With a ‘ta’ sound, Zhong

Wanchou's sabre connected with the ground. He saw that the man holding Zhong Ling was none other than 'Thoroughly Cruel and Evil' Yun Zhonghe. He angrily said, "What...what are you doing?!"

Yun Zhonghe laughed. "You don't even want this daughter anymore. Just pretend that she's dead and that you chopped her to death. Let me have her." Even as he spoke, he further flew tens of more feet away. He knew very well that aside from Emperor Baoding and the Yellow Browed Monk, whose martial arts were far above his own, even Duan Zhengchun and Gao Shengtai were incredible figures. And so, as soon as he hatched the scheme to kidnap Zhong Ling, he immediately fled. Seeing that Ba Tianshi was not present, he knew that as long as he could utilize his qinggong, not a single person present could catch up to him.

Zhong Wanchou knew that his qinggong abilities were incredible. He was so worried that he was literally hopping mad, jumping up and down as he cursed. Emperor Baoding had seen Yun Zhonghe run around in circles with Ba Tianshi the other day. Today, seeing Yun Zhonghe move as though he were unburdened despite carrying Zhong Ling, he knew that there was nothing he could do either.

Duan Yu suddenly had a idea flash by his head. "Yue Number Three! Your master has an order for you! Quick, get this young girl back!" The Divine Crocodile was startled, then angrily replied, "Bastard, whaddya talking about?" Duan Yu said, "You accepted me as your master, and even kowtowed to me. Are you going back on your words? Are your promises worth nothing more than a fart? You must really want to be a bastard son of a turtle!"

The Divine Crocodile furrowed his eyebrows as storm clouds gathered across his face. He thundered, "Of course I won't go back on my words! So what if you are my master? If you piss me off, I'll even kill you, my 'master'!" Duan Yu replied, "It's good that you recognize me as your master! Miss Zhong is my wife. That makes her your master-wife. Go

get her back for me! If Yun Zhonghe disgraces her, then he's disgracing your master-wife! You'll lose so much face that you won't be able to be considered a hero or a real man!"

The Divine Crocodile was startled. He thought to himself, "Huh, these words make a lot of sense." But he suddenly thought to himself that Mu Wanqing was Duan Yu's wife. How was it that this little girl surnamed Zhong was also his wife? He asked, "How many master-wives do I have, anyhow?" Duan Yu replied, "Stop asking! The bottom line is, if you aren't able to get back this master-wife, you'll lose a huge amount of face. All of the heroes present have seen with their own eyes that you can't even overcome the Fourth Evil, Yun Zhonghe. That drops you down to the position of being the Fifth Evil. Heck, maybe you'll become the Sixth Evil!"

To the Divine Crocodile, being ranked beneath Yun Zhonghe was literally a fate worse than death. He'd feel less miserable if he were killed. He let out an insane roar, then rushed towards Yun Zhonghe. He screamed, "Put down my master-wife right now!"

Running and leaping forwards, Yun Zhonghe called out, "Yue Number Three, you really are a gigantic idiot! You've fallen for his trick!" The Divine Crocodile loved more than anything else to think of himself as an awe-inspiring person. Hearing Yun Zhonghe claim in front of so many people that he had been tricked only infuriated him all the more. He loudly roared to the heavens, "How could I, Yue Number Two, fall for someone else's tricks?" He immediately sped up his pursuit. In the blink of an eye, the two of them, one in the front, the other in hot pursuit, passed outside the gorge.

In the middle of his earlier, blind rage, Zhong Wanchou had chopped towards his daughter. But at this moment, seeing his daughter being abducted by a thug, he was greatly agitated. After all, the love between a father and his daughter was deep. Not to mention, he realized that if his wife asked him what had happened, he would be incapable

of giving her an answer. In a fit of desperation, he, too, chased after them.

Emperor Baoding quickly bade the crowd of heroes farewell, and with the rest of his party also left the gorge. They returned to the city of Dali and returned to the South-Subduing Palace. Hua Hegen, Fan Hua, and Ba Tianshi emerged from the palace to welcome them. Next to them was a bright and beautiful young lady, dressed in the most gorgeous of clothes and ornaments. It was Mu Wanqing.

Fan Hua gave a brief report to Emperor Baoding about Hua Hegen digging out a tunnel, putting Zhong Ling in the stone house, and rescuing Mu Wanqing. Only now did everyone realize that this was why Zhong Wanchou, in trying to harm others, ended up harming himself. Everyone laughed uproariously.

Although the power of the 'Yin and Yang Conjoining' powder was very fierce, it wasn't poisonous. After taking a dose of counteracting medicine, then drinking a big bowl full of cold water, the powder's effect was dissolved.

At noon, the palace prepared a banquet. During the banquet, everyone happily and animatedly discussed all the events which had transpired at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. Everyone agreed that the contributions of the Yellow Browed Monk and Hua Hegen were the greatest. If the Yellow Browed Monk hadn't kept Duan Yanqing distracted, he certainly would have discovered the tunnel being dug.

Dao Baifeng said, "Brother Hua, I would like to trouble you to do something else for me as well." Hua Hegen replied, "Princess, say the word. I will obey your order." Dao Baifeng said, "Please send someone to collapse the tunnel." Hua Hegen was startled. He replied, "Yes ma'am!" But he did not understand what she was thinking. Dao Baifeng gave Duan Zhengchun a hard stare. "This tunnel passes by Madame Zhong's bedroom. If you don't collapse it, I'm afraid that one of the gentlemen currently present will henceforth go tunnel

his way there every night from now on.” Everyone present burst into loud laughter.

Every once in a while, Mu Wanqing would steal glances towards Duan Yu. Every time their gazes crossed, they would quickly turn their heads away from each other. She knew that for the rest of her life, she could forget about being wife and husband with him. Thinking back to the situation of the past few days, where they shared a room, she felt all the more miserable. She heard everyone discuss how Zhong Ling would become Duan Yu’s concubine, and how despite being kidnapped by Yun Zhonghe, the Divine Crocodile and Zhong Wanchou would surely bring her back. She also heard Emperor Baoding order the Four Imperial Bodyguards to send out search teams to find news regarding Zhong Ling and to protect her. The more Mu Wanqing heard, the angrier she got. From her bosom, she retrieved a tiny golden case. It was the letter which Madame Zhong had given to Duan Yu, requesting his father come and rescue Zhong Ling. She handed it over to Duan Zhengchun and said, “Gan Baobao asked me to give this to you.”

Duan Zhengchun was startled. “Huh?” Mu Wanqing indignantly said, “It’s the little girl’s astrological birth horoscope.” Pointing towards Duan Yu with the golden box, she said, “Gan Baobao told him to give it to you.” Duan Zhengchun took the box, his heart aching. He had immediately recognized the golden box as the gift which he had given to Gan Baobao on the night when they had first requited their passions for each other. Opening the cover of the box, he saw a small piece of red paper with words written on it. There were nine words in total. “December 5th, year of the Sheep, the ‘chou’ hour [1AM-3AM].” The handwriting was in a trembling scrawl. It was definitely Gan Baobao’s personal writing.

Dao Baifeng coldly said, “How very lovely. She’s even sent the girl’s birth horoscope over to us.”

Duan Zhengchun turned over the red paper, only to see several lines of small words written on it. “Broken-heartedly waiting, every hope has turned to dust. A child cannot be without a father. Sixteen years ago, I thought about you every morning and longed for you every evening, hoping that you would come to me. But now I am out of alternatives. As of the May of the ‘Yiwei’ year [32nd year of a 60 year cycle], I belong to the Zhong clan.” Every single word was extremely fine and slender. If one didn’t squint, the words would be nearly invisible.

Duan Zhengchun’s eyes reddened as he recalled how very badly he had let down Gan Baobao. Suddenly, his heart trembled, and in an instant he understood the hidden meaning behind the words of these few lines. “Baobao married Zhong Wanchou in May of the ‘Yiwei’ year, but Zhong Ling was born on December 5th of the ‘Gai’ year. Most likely, she isn’t Zhong Wanchou’s daughter. After waiting for me and seeing me not come, she wrote that a child cannot be without a father. Then she said that she had no alternative to marrying, because she couldn’t give birth to a child without having a husband. That means that Zhong Ling is my daughter. It was precisely...it was precisely sixteen years ago, in the spring, when the two of us shared a joyous time lasting not even a full month. That must be when she conceived Zhong Ling....”

[Note from [Wuxiapedia](#):

Gan Baobao: Married Zhong Wanchou in the 6th lunar month during the year of Yi-Mao [己卯年] and gave birth to Zhong Ling six months later (in the 12th lunar month) (Chapter 9, 3rd edition only). In the 2nd edition, the wedding was erroneously written as having taken place in the 5th lunar month during the year of Yi-Wei [己未年], a whole 25 years before Zhong Ling's 2nd edition birth-year of Geng-Shen!

Zhong Ling: Born during the Chou hour (1:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m.) on the 5th day of the 12th lunar month in the year of

Yi-Mao [] (Chapter 2, 3rd edition only). In the 2nd edition, she was born in the year of Geng-Shen [] instead.]

After understanding everything, he suddenly blurted out, "Oh, no! This won't do!"

Dao Baifeng asked, "What won't do?" Duan Zhengchun shook his head. With a forced smile, he said, "This fellow, Zhong Wanchou...this fellow really has a malicious heart, to come up with such a poisonous plot to harm my Duan family. We definitely cannot...definitely cannot become in-laws with him. No matter what, we cannot do this!"

Hearing him hemming and hawing, Dao Baifeng knew that his words were insincere. She took the red piece of paper from his hands and read it. She pondered it for a moment, then suddenly broke out into loud laughter. "So she...so she...ha ha...so that little girl Zhong Ling is also your daughter!" Her anger rising, she sent out a palm. Duan Zhengchun leaned his head to the side to avoid it.

Everyone in the hall felt extremely awkward and embarrassed. Emperor Baoding let out a small smile. "Since this is the case, then it looks like we'll have to abandon the idea of marriage..."

Suddenly, one of the family warriors entered the hall. In his hands, he respectfully proffered a name placard. Bowing, he said, "Master Guo Yanzhi of the Hulao Pass has come to see you, lord." Duan Zhengchun thought to himself that Guo Yanzhi was the eldest disciple of Ke Baisui leader of the 'Hidden Ox' sect. He was nicknamed the 'Soul Pursuing Whip'. Supposedly, his martial arts were quite good, but he never had any relations with the Duan family. Why would he come from such a long distance? He immediately rose to his feet and said to Emperor Baoding, "I don't know what this man has come here for. Your brother will go take a look."

Emperor Baoding nodded, a small smile on his lips. "The arrival of 'Soul Pursuing Whip' is very fortuitous for you. You can seize the opportunity to sneak away."

Duan Zhengchun left the flower pavilion. Gao Shengtai and the Four Imperial Bodyguards followed behind him. Entering the hall, he saw a middle-aged man of great height seated on a chair to the west. The man was wearing a mourning garment. He wore a hat on his head, and his face was covered with dust and dirt. His eyes were red and swollen. It was evident that a tragedy had happened, and that a family member must have died.

Upon seeing Duan Zhengchun enter, he quickly rose to his feet and bowed. "Guo Yanzhi of Henan pays his respects to the prince." Duan Zhengchun returned the salute. "Master Guo, you honor Dali with your presence. Please forgive your little brother Duan Zhengchun for not having come out and welcomed you to the city personally." Guo Yanzhi thought to himself, "Everyone says that despite being rich and powerful, the Duan brothers of Dali are not arrogant at all. That really is the case." He said, "Guo Yanzhi is only a common, ordinary person. For me to beg an audience from the prince is really quite presumptuous of me." Duan Zhengchun replied, "The position of 'prince' is just something set up to show the common people. I have long admired the reputation of Master Guo. Let us address each other as friends and as brothers. There's no need for us to adhere to such false propriety." After introducing him to Gao Shengtai, all three of them sat down.

Guo Yanzhi said, "Prince, my martial-uncle has resided within your palace for a long time now, and has long been away from home. Please tell him that I would like to see him." Duan Zhengchun said, "Brother Guo, your martial-uncle?" He thought to himself, "There's no member of the 'Hidden Ox' sect in my palace." Guo Yanzhi said, "My martial-uncle changed his name and surname, hiding himself within your palace to avoid a calamity. He didn't dare expose himself to you, Prince. This really was very disrespectful. I hope that you, Prince, will be forgiving and

merciful, and won't blame him. Allow me to thank you in advance."

As he spoke, he rose to his feet and profoundly saluted Duan Zhengchun with cupped hands. While returning the courtesy, Duan Zhengchun was deeply pondering the situation, but could not come to a realization as to who his martial-uncle might be.

Gao Shengtai was also wondering to himself, "Who is it? Who could it be?" Suddenly, he thought of that person's surname and nickname. "It must be him!" He spoke to a nearby servant. "Go to the accounting rooms and tell Mr. Huo that the 'Soul Pursuing Whip' of Henan, Master Guo, has arrived. He has important news to report to the 'Golden Abacus', the venerable senior Cui. Please invite him to the great hall to chat with us."

The servant nodded and left. After a short time, the sound of footsteps coming from the back hall could be heard. All alone, a man appeared, slowly shambling forwards. He said, "Now, thanks to you, I won't be able to have free meals here anymore."

Upon hearing the seven words, 'the Golden Abacus, venerable senior Cui', the expression on Duan Zhengchun's face changed slightly. He thought to himself, "Can it be that the 'Golden Abacus', Cui Baiquan, really is hidden here? How could I have been unaware of this, and why wouldn't worthy brother Gao have told me?" Only to see an old man with a humble appearance emerge with a grin on his face. It was Mr. Huo of the accounting room, who assisted in all sorts of menial tasks. Every day, the man was either intoxicated or gambling. He was extremely lazy. The only reason why they had allowed him to stay for the past ten or so years was because he was totally honest with regards to the accounting. Duan Zhengchun was hugely surprised. "So Mr. Huo really is Cui Baiquan? I have eyes but am blind as a bat. How can I possibly recover the face I have lost?" Fortunately, Gao Shengtai had managed to come up with the right

person in a single try, leading Guo Yanzi to assume that the people of the South-Subduing Palace had long since known about the situation.

Originally, Mr. Huo was always seventy percent drunken, thirty percent awake, with a confused and uncomprehending expression perpetually on his face. But seeing Guo Yanzhi wearing mourning clothes, he couldn't help but feel startled. He asked, "You...why are you..." Guo Yanzhi rushed forward a few steps. He fell to his knees and began to cry loudly. "Martial uncle Cui, my mas...master has been murdered!" The face of Mr. Huo, of Cui Baiquan, immediately change. His skinny yellow visage turned, in a twinkling of an eye, sinister and predatory. Slowly, he said, "Who is our enemy." Guo Yanzhi replied, crying, "Your nephew is useless. I wasn't able to definitively identify our enemy. But from what I know, I guess that it is probable that the murderer was a member of Gusu's Murong family." A look of dread flashed across Cui Baiquan's face, but it quickly vanished. In a low voice, he said, "We need to carefully calculate our response."

Duan Zhengchun and Gao Shengtai exchanged a glance. They thought to themselves, "'Northern Qiao Feng, Southern Murong.' If the 'Hidden Ox' sect has become enemies with the Murong clan, then it will be very difficult for them to avenge their loss."

A distressed look was on Cui Baiquan's face. He said, "Worthy nephew Guo, please recount the story of how my martial brother died as clearly as possible." Guo Yanzhi said, "The murder of one's master is like the murder of one's father. Every day that vengeance is delayed, your nephew finds it hard to eat or sleep. Martial uncle, please go with me immediately, and I will report it to you on the road, so as to avoid wasting any more time."

Seeing the expression of his face, Cui Baiquan realized that it was because he felt there were too many people in the hall, making it inconvenient to speak, rather than really being worried about time. He thought to himself, "For ten

years or so, I've hidden myself here and not revealed myself at all. I never would have thought that Marquis Gao had long ago realized my true identity and seen past my masquerade. If I do not apologize to Prince Duan, then I will have deeply offended the Duan family. In addition, I want to seek revenge upon Gusu's Murong family on behalf of my martial brother, but that's something I cannot accomplish by myself. If the Duan family is willing to send people to assist me, things may be different. The difference between 'friends' and 'enemies' is huge." He abruptly walked over to Duan Zhengchun's side, then knelt before him on both knees. He repeatedly kowtowed, banging his head against the ground with a series of 'dong' sounds.

This was something which was totally unexpected by everyone present. Duan Zhengchun hurriedly stretched out his hand to lift Cui Baiquan up, only to find that it was as though Cui Baiquan's body had been nailed to the floor, not budging in the slightest. Duan Zhengchun thought to himself, "Nicely done, you 'drunkard'. So your martial arts is this profound. You totally deceived me!" Exerting his strength through both his arms, he lifted Cui Baiquan upwards. Cui Baiquan no longer resisted, and rose to his feet. As soon as he stood up, he felt as though the hundred bones in his body were filled with unspeakable discomfort, as though a tiny boat was being thrown about by killer waves in the ocean. He knew that it was Duan Zhengchun's way of reprimanding him. He thought to himself, "If I generate my energy to resist, then the South-Subduing Prince will be all the more upset with me. Perhaps he will even suspect me all the more of having crafty ulterior motives for having snuck my way into his palace. While his internal energy is raging inside my body, I might as well fall down." He collapsed, head facing the sky and cutting a sorry figure indeed as he let out a cry. "Ow!"

Duan Zhengchun let out a small smile and extended his hand to help him up. With a light touch, he dispelled the

nauseous feeling in his body.

Cui Baiquan said, "Prince, Cui Baiquan was pressed so heavily by his enemy that he had nowhere to turn. For this reason only did I hide myself within your manor and rely on your aid. Only by hiding myself under your glorious name have I managed to live until today. Cui Baiquan never revealed the truth to you, Prince, and I deserve to die a thousand deaths for my offense."

Gao Shengtai replied, "Brother, why be so modest? The prince knew your true identity long ago. But since you, Brother Cui, were unwilling to reveal your true identity, the prince did not want to break your disguise either. Forget about the prince, even others know about the situation. That day, when Duan Yu was fighting against the Divine Crocodile, didn't he grab Brother Cui and claim you were his master? He knew that within this palace, only Brother Cui could handle that vile fellow surnamed Yue."

Actually, that day when Duan Yu had grabbed Cui Baiquan and claimed he was his master, he was purely putting on a show for entertainment. As Cui Baiquan's appearance was the most unsightly and humble within the palace, he had picked him to mock the Divine Crocodile. But at the moment, upon hearing these words, Cui Baiquan believed and did not doubt them. He secretly felt ashamed.

Gao Shengtai continued, "The prince has always been a welcome and hospitable host. Brother Cui, you came to Dali without any malicious intent. But even if you had come with an intent on causing harm, the prince would have courteously welcomed you and thrown a banquet on your behalf. Brother Cui, why stand on such ceremony?" The implicit meaning of this statement was that the only reason Cui had not been exposed was because he had not come with an evil intent; if he had, he would have been disposed of long ago.

Cui Baiquan said, "Marquis Gao is brilliant and wise. Although your words are very kind, I, the one surnamed Cui,

should make clear to you the reason why I sought refuge within your palace and why I must depart now. Otherwise, my actions would be too inglorious. Only, this matter involves others. If I may be so bold, I would like to explain.”

Duan Zhengchun nodded. He said to Guo Yanzhi, “Brother Guo, although the enmity between you and your master’s killer is deep, there’s no need to quibble over such a small amount of time. Let’s slowly discuss the situation.” Before Guo Yanzhi had a chance to respond, Cui Baiquan had already hurriedly said, “Naturally, I will obey the requests of the prince.”

At this moment, a family warrior entered the hall. Bowing at the entrance, he said, “Reporting to the prince! The abbot of Shaolin has sent two eminent monks with a letter for you.” Ever since Shaolin had been founded in the Tang dynasty, it had been the Mt. Tai and the Big Dipper of the wulin [meaning that it held a position of extreme eminence]. Upon hearing these words, Duan Zhengchun immediately stood up and left the hall to personally welcome the guests.

He saw a pair of middle-aged monks being escorted by two of his family warriors, making their way past the small yard. One of the monks, who had a dry and shriveled up appearance, bowed towards Duan Zhengchun, then said, “The junior monks of Shaolin, Huizhen and Huiguan, pay their respects to the prince.” Duan Zhengchun cupped his hands, returning the courtesy. “For you to have travelled such a distance to brighten my doorway must have been very difficult on you. Please, come inside and have some tea.”

After entering the pavilion, the two monks did not sit. Huizhen said, “Prince, this humble monk has come here on the instructions of my abbot to deliver a letter to Emperor Baoding or the South-Subduing Prince.” As he spoke, he withdrew a wrapped bundle from his breast. Slowly he unwrapped it, removing a yellow parchment from within, then pro-offering it respectfully to Duan Zhengchun.

Duan Zhengchun accepted it, then said, "My imperial brother actually is inside at this very moment. This is the perfect time for you to meet him." He said to Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi, "Gentlemen, please take some refreshments for now. We will speak shortly." He then brought Huizhen and Huiguan deeper within the palace.

Actually, at this moment, Emperor Baoding had already retired into the warm pavilion and was having a tranquil conversation with the Yellow Browed Monk. Duan Yu sat next to them and listened quietly. Upon seeing Huizhen and Huiguan, he rose to his feet. Duan Zhengchun handed the scroll over to Emperor Baoding, who opened it. The letter was addressed to them two, and was filled with such flowery language as "long respected your illustrious name, but never had the fortune to meet you," "rule over the south, acting with vast benevolence," "admired by thousands of people, of exceptional ability and wisdom," "guardian of the Buddhist truth, glorifying the saintly path," etc. etc. etc. Finally, it came to the meat of the letter. "My younger martial brother, Master Xuanbei, will be heading towards your respected area with his four disciples. On the basis of our shared worship of Buddha and of our friendship within the wulin, I respectfully request that you take good care of him." The letter was signed, "The lowly disciple of the Shaolin monastery, Xuanci, pays a hundred respects."

Emperor Baoding rose while he read the letter to show the respect he held for Shaolin. Huizhen and Huiguan politely stood off to their side. Emperor Baoding said, "The two of you, please be seated. All of us followers of Buddha's teachings and, as members of the wulin, share the same heart and arteries. Whatever the abbot of Shaolin requests, we will certainly exert all of our efforts to comply with. Master Xuanbei's understanding of Buddhism is extremely subtle, and his martial arts level is deep and profound. I admire him to the extreme. Might I ask when he will grace my humble abode? We eagerly anticipate his arrival."

Huizhen and Huiguan suddenly felt to their knees. With a series of 'dong' sounds, they kowtowed repeatedly. They began to cry bitterly.

Emperor Baoding and Duan Zhengchun were both startled. They thought to themselves, "Can it be that Master Xuanbei has died?" Emperor Baoding stretched his hand out and helped them up. "Both of us are members of the wulin. You cannot be so polite towards me." Huizhen stood up and indeed said, "My master has passed on to Nirvana." Emperor Baoding thought to himself, "This letter must have been intended for Master Xuanbei to personally present to me. Can it be that he died within the borders of Dali?" He said, "Master Xuanbei has returned to the western heavens. The Buddhist family has lost an eminent monk, and the wulin has lost a skilled exponent. This is mournful news indeed. May I ask when Master Xuanbei entered Nirvana?"

Huizhen replied, "A month ago, my martial uncle, the abbot, received a letter stating that the 'Four Greatest Evils of the World' were headed towards Dali with the intention of making trouble for your majesty and for the South-Subduing Prince. The Duan dynasty of Dali reigns supreme over the southern world. Naturally, you wouldn't fear such a trifling group as the 'Four Evils'. But the abbot feared that you two might not know of this news and fall into their ambush. Thus, he sent Master Xuanbei and us four disciples to come here and inform you. This is why we came."

Emperor Baoding felt a deep sense of gratitude. He thought to himself, "No wonder Shaolin has been held in the utmost respect for the past hundreds of years. He has taken it upon himself to safeguard the wulin. Although we are located in the distant south, he has so much concern over our well-being. Although in his letter, he asked that we take good care of Master Xuanbei, his actual intent was to station him here to assist us." He immediately bowed slightly and said, "Abbot Xuanci is a man of great kindness and

thoughtfulness. I do not know how we brothers can repay him.”

Huizhen replied, “Your majesty, you are too modest. Our group rushed southwards upon receiving his directive. On the twenty eighth of last month, we arrived at Dali’s Liangzhou prefecture and took shelter for the night at Shenjie monastery. Who would have imagined that on the morning of the twenty ninth, as we four disciples woke up, we saw that our master...our master had been murdered. He died in the main hall of the Shenjie monastery....” As he came to this point, he was sobbing so much that no further words could come out.

Emperor Baoding let out a long sigh. He asked, “Was Master Xuanbei killed by means of poison or hidden weaponry?” Huizhen replied, “No.” Emperor Baoding, the Yellow Browed Monk, Duan Zhengchun, and Gao Shengtai were all startled. They thought to themselves, “With Xuanbei’s level of martial arts, unless he was struck by hidden weaponry coated with a poison that would kill on contact, even if the enemy had ambushed him from behind, he wouldn’t be completely defenseless and die on the spot. Within Dali, what evil master martial artist has such a high and vicious level of ability?”

Duan Zhengchun said, “Today is the third. The twenty eighth of last month was four days ago. Yu’er was kidnapped on the night of the twenty seventh.” Emperor Baoding nodded. “It wasn’t the ‘Four Evils’.” For the past few days, Duan Yanqing had been focused on keeping guard over Duan Yu. He definitely wouldn’t have had the time to travel such a great distance to commit murder at the Shenjie monastery. In addition, even if it were Duan Yanqing, he wouldn’t have been able to silently and stealthily kill Xuanbei in the blink of an eye.

Huizhen said, “As we propped up our master, we felt that his entire body was icy cold. He had gone to Nirvana hours ago. There was no trace of any battle having occurred within

the main hall. We rushed out of the temple, and the monks of Shenjie monastery assisted us as well. But within a ten-li radius, we couldn't find a single trace of the murderer's passing.

Emperor Baoding gloomily said, "Master Xuanbei not only died on behalf of the Duan family, but perished within the borders of Dali. No matter how one views it, we two brothers definitely cannot let this go unpunished."

Huizhen and Huiguan immediately dropped to their knees, kowtowing in thanks. Huizhen spoke again. "After the four of us discussed the situation with Abbot Wuye of Shenjie monastery, we decided to temporarily keep our master's remains at Shenjie monastery. We didn't dare to cremate him on the spot, so as to allow our martial-uncle, the abbot, to see him with his own eyes. The other two disciples rushed back to Shaolin to report the situation to the abbot. This humble monk and Huiguan rushed to Dali to report the situation to your imperial majesty, and to the South-Subduing Prince."

Emperor Baoding said, "Abbot Wuye is of venerable age and eminent virtue. His knowledge is broad and he knows many anecdotes regarding the wulin. What did he have to say?"

Huizhen replied, "Abbot Wuye said: 'There is an eighty or ninety percent chance that the murdered was a member of Gusu's Murong family'."

Duan Zhengchun and Gao Shengtai exchanged glances. Both of them thought to themselves, "Once again, it's Gusu's Murong family!"

Up til now, the Yellow Browed Monk had been silent. He interjected, "Did Master Xuanbei die due to a strike to the chest, with the enemy technique being the 'Great Veda Sceptre'?" Huizhen was startled. "Great Master, your guess is just so. How...how did you..." The Yellow Browed Monk replied, "I've long heard that Master Xuanbei was an expert at Shaolins 'Great Veda Sceptre' technique. When fighting

opponents, their ribs would snap from his blows. This martial arts skill, although fearfully powerful, is too tyrannous and brutal. It really does not seem like a Buddhist martial arts at all...alas!" Duan Yu interrupted, "Right! This martial arts is too brutal and ruthless."

Hearing the Yellow Browed Monk criticize their teacher, Huizhen and Huigen naturally felt resentment. But knowing that he was of a senior generation, they did not dare to contradict him. Upon hearing Duan Yu chattering from the side, they were so furious that their eyes bulged out. Duan Yu pretended not to notice, paying them no mind.

Duan Zhengchun asked, "Martial brother, how did you know that Xuanbei died from the 'Great Veda Sceptre'? The Yellow Browed Monk sighed. "For Abbot Wuye of Shenjie monastery to be so certain that the murdered was of the Murong family, he certainly must have had corroborating evidence. Gusu's Murong family is known for something called, 'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' Have you heard of this?" Duan Zhengchun mumbled to himself, "I have heard this saying before, but never really understand its meaning." The Yellow Browed Monk murmured, "'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' Hm. 'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent...' Suddenly, a look of dread flashed across his face. Emperor Baoding and Duan Zhengchun, in the decades they had known him, had never seen him be afraid. The other day, when he was engaged in a life and death duel with Crown Prince Yanqing, he was clearly in a losing position. Although he was in an extremely difficult situation, that look of utter calmness never left his face. For him to now show fear indicated that their opponent definitely was no one to look down upon.

For a period of time, there's only silence within the warm pavilion. After a long moment, the Yellow Browed Monk said slowly, "This old monk has heard that within the world, there is a person known as Murong Bo. His personal name is 'Bo',

abundant, and his martial arts knowledge and abilities truly are abundant and profound to the extreme. It seemed as though he knew every single unique and consummate skill of every sect within the wulin. He knew every one of them, and could use them as well. In addition, whenever he wanted to kill someone, he would use the same skills which that person had gained fame with."

Duan Yu said, "This really is strange beyond imagining! There are so many martial arts in the world. How can he possibly comprehensively learn them all?" The Yellow Browed Monk replied, "Worthy nephew, your comment is correct. The body of learning is as vast as the sea. How could a single person know everything? But Murong Bo did not have many enemies to begin with. In addition, it was said that if Murong Bo was unable to kill his enemy with their own martial arts, he would not kill them at all."

Emperor Baoding said, "I too have heard that there is such a strange man in the central plains. Hebei's Three Warriors of the Luo Family excelled in using flying awls. Eventually, all three of them died due to flying awls. Daoist Zhangxu of Shandong, when killing his opponents, would chop off all four of their limbs, causing them to cry out in agony for a long time before passing away. Daoist Zhangxu himself met with such a bitter end. The phrase describing Murong Bo, 'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent', came from Daoist Zhangxu's dying lips." After pausing for a moment, he continued. "That year, within the busy streets of Jinan, who knows how many people watched as Daoist Zhangxu rolled about on the floor, limbless and howling." As he said this, it seemed as though he was dimly seeing in his mind the sight of Daoist Zhangxu's cruel death. His face was filled with both resentment and with an unbearable look.

Duan Zhengchun nodded. "Then it must be so." He suddenly thought of something, and said, "Master Guo Yanzhi's master, Ke Baisui, was said to be a master of the

soft whip. The powerful force release from his whip was pure and hard. When killing his opponents, he could often crush their skull with a single whip. Can it be that he...he..." Slapping his hands together three times, he called for a servant. "Invite Mr. Cui and Master Guo inside. Tell them I have something to discuss with them." The servant replied, "Yes sir!" But he didn't know who Mr. Cui was, and hesitated to leave. Duan Yu laughed. "Mr. Cui is the Mr. Huo of the accounting room." Only now did the servant loudly reply, "Yes sir!" Turning his body, he left.

After a short period of time, Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi arrived at the warm pavilion. Duan Zhengchun said, "Brother Guo, there's something I must ask you. Please do not be offended." Guo Yanzhi replied, "I will not." Duan Zhengchun said, "Might I asked, how was old master Ke ambushed and murdered? Was he fatally wounded by punches and kicks, or by martial weaponry?" Suddenly, Guo Yanzhi's entire face flushed red. A look of deep shame on his face, he stammered for a long moment. Finally, he spoke. "My respected master was slain by the soft whip technique, the 'Thousand Rendings of the Heavenly Spirit'. The murderer's power was extremely hard and ferocious. Even my master himself could not...could not..."

Emperor Baoding, Duan Zhengchun, the Yellow Browed Monk, and the others exchanged glances. They couldn't help but feel a chill in their hearts.

Huizhen walked towards Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi. After saluting them, he said, "This humble monk and his brother share the same enmity with you two brothers. If we do not eradicate Gusu's Murong family..." As he came to this point, he halted. Whether or not they could actually wipe out Gusu's Murong family was hard to say. He clenched his teeth. "...then this humble monk will simply give his life to them instead." Tears filling his eyes, Guo Yanzhi said, "Shaolin also has a deep enmity with Gusu's Murong

family?" Huizhen gave a brief summary of how his master, Xuanbei, died at the hands of Gusu's Murong family.

Guo Yanzhi's face was filled with grief and indignation as he listened, and he gnashed his teeth with hate. Cui Baiquan, on the other hand, simply looked crestfallen and was silent, as though the death of his brother was not a matter of great importance at all. Huiguan said, "Mr. Cui, are you afraid of Gusu's Murong family?" Huizhen quickly interjected, "Martial brother, do not be so rude!" Cui Baiquan glanced to the east, then to the west, as though he were afraid that the walls might have grown eyes or ears, or as though a powerful enemy had arrived and was about to launch a sneak attack. A look of utter terror was on his face. Huiguan let out a 'heng', then muttered to himself, "If a real man is faced with death, then so be it. What's the point of being afraid?" Huizhen also did not approve of Cui Baiquan's attitude. Thus, having already reprimanding his martial brother once, he no longer said anything.

The Yellow Browed Monk coughed lightly. "This matter..." Cui Baiquan's entire body shuddered. He jumped up, so hurriedly that he overturned his teacup. With a 'ping' and a 'pang', it crashed to the floor, breaking into tiny pieces. After calming himself down and collecting himself, he noticed that all eyes were on him. He flushed with same. "Sorry, I'm very sorry!" Guo Yanzhi knitted his brow, then bent over and began to pick up the broken pieces of the shattered teacup.

Duan Zhengchun thought to himself, "This Cui Baiquan fellow is useless." He said to the Yellow Browed Monk, "Martial brother, what were you going to say?"

The Yellow Browed Monk took another sip of tea, then said unhurriedly, "Benefactor Cui, I take it that you have met Murong Bo before?" Upon hearing the three words, 'Murong Bo', Cui Baiquan let out a little 'ah' cry of fear. His two arms propping him up on the arms of the chair, he stammered, "I never...I...I saw him...I didn't..." Huiguan loudly said, "Mr. Cui, have you met Murong Bo before or not?" Cui Baiquan

stared towards the sky, as though his spirit had fled his body. Duan Zhengchun and all the others were secretly shaking their heads. Seeing his martial uncle shame himself in front of all these people, Guo Yanzhi felt all the more humiliated and miserable. Only after a long time did Cui Baiquan say, in a quavering voice, "I didn't...well...I kind of...it seems there was...this..."

The Yellow Browed Monk interjected, "This humble monk has a personal experience which I will relate to everyone, so that everyone might know the details. This was something that happened forty three years ago, when I was young and in the prime of my strength. I had just entered the martial world, and had gained a little bit of fame within the jianghu. I really was a 'newborn calf who did not fear a tiger' [Chinese saying meant that an ignorant person knows no fear]! I felt that despite the vastness of the world, aside from my own master, no one had higher martial arts skill than me. That year, I was escorting a retiring official and his family back to their old homes. We were travelling from Bianliang back to Shandong. At a mountain pass near the Blue Leopard Ridge, we came upon four bandits. After they saw us, their first move was not to go after our belongings, but rather for that official's daughter. At the time, I was young and impetuous. Naturally, I showed no mercy with my blows, and every strike was a vicious one. I exercised the power of my Vajra Fingers, and drove each finger into an enemy heart with each attack. All four of the bandits died before they had so much as a chance to grunt."

"I really thought that I was something incredible, and began to brag and boast to that retiring official. I said things like, 'Even if eight or ten bandits came, I would take their lives with my Vajra Finger.' At that moment, I heard the sound of hoofsteps, and two people rode past on a donkey. Suddenly, one of the persons on the back of the donkey let out a 'heng'. It was a female's voice, but that 'heng' was filled with contempt and disdain. I turned around and saw a

thirty six year old married woman on the donkey. The other person was a fifteen year old lad with delicate and extremely attractive features. Both of them were wearing white mourning clothes, showing great filial piety. That youth said, "Ma, what's so impressive about the Vajra Finger, for someone to come here to brag about it?"

The origins of the Yellow Browed Monk, even Emperor Baoding and his brother were not too clear about. But everyone here very much respected his display at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, where he used the power of his Vajra Finger to carve out a chessboard, carve out chess moves, and struggle unyieldingly against Crown Prince Yanqing. His Vajra Finger was even more venerated. At this moment, hearing him recount these events, they all thought to themselves that it was just a young, ignorant kid whose words were full of nonsense.

They didn't expect that the Yellow Browed Monk would let out a light sigh before continuing. "At that time, I was angry upon hearing these words. But I thought to myself, why be upset over the wild ramblings of a little kid? I glared at him, but paid him no attention. Only to hear the woman upbraid him. She said, 'This person's Vajra Finger comes from the orthodox teachings of the Putian Damo Courtyard of Fujian. He's achieved a thirty percent proficiency in it. What does a little kid like you know? When you strike with your fingers, you aren't as accurate as he is.'"

"As I heard this, I was both startled and angry. Very few people of the jianghu knew where my martial arts originated from, yet this woman was able to determine it with a single sentence. In addition, she claimed that my Vajra Fingers had only reached a level of thirty percent proficiency. Of course I couldn't take this lying down. Alas, at that time, I really had no idea as to how high the heaven is, or how deep the earth is. Based on my level of actual ability at that time, for someone to say that I had reached thirty percent proficiency was already giving me too much credit. At most, I had

reached perhaps twenty six or twenty seven percent proficiency. I loudly said, "Madame, what is your respected surname? Your son belittled my Vajra Finger. Does he wish to exchange a few stances and pointers with me?" That kid brought the donkey to a halt and was about to respond. Suddenly, the lady's eyes reddened and tears appeared in her eyes. "What words did your father say to you just before he died? Have you already forgotten?" That youth replied, "Understood. I don't dare forget." They spurred the donkey on and galloped forwards.

"The more I thought about it, the less I could accept their words. I spurred on my own horse to catch up to them. I called out, 'Hey! You came here and spewed nonsense about my martial arts, but refused to exchange a few pointers with me. Do you really plan to just get away that easily?' I was riding an extremely fine stallion. As I spoke, I passed by their donkey, then came to a halt in front of them. That woman said to her son, 'See? You said a bunch of rubbish, and now other people are upset.' That youth was clearly very obedient towards his mother, and did not dare to even glance at me. I saw that they were afraid of me, and thought to myself that they were just a widow and an orphan, with no martial abilities. Why lower myself to their level? But from the woman's words, it seemed as though that youth also knew the Vajra Finger. It took me over fifteen years to begin to master this set of martial arts. How could this little kid possibly know it? Naturally, they were just blowing hot air. I said, 'Today, I'll let you guys go. In the future, be more careful when speaking.'"

"The woman still didn't even so much as glance at me. She said to the youth, 'The words of this uncle are correct. In the future, be more careful when you speak.' It would have been so much better if I had just let the matter drop here. But that that time, I was young and strong-headed, and did not move my horse away, continuing to block the road. The woman got off the donkey and began to walk in front of it.

The youth patted the donkey, then also got off and began to lead it past me. I let out a big laugh and aimed a blow at the donkey with my whip, saying, 'Hurry, scram!' But before my whip reached a foot of the body of the donkey, the youth turned around. With a 'chi' sound, he pointed, projecting his internal energy through the air and knocking my whip out of my hand. This terrified me so badly that I was totally stunned. The power of his finger was extremely strong, far surpassing my own."

"I heard the woman say, 'Since you have already attacked, you might as well finish the job.' The youth said, 'Yes!' He turned the donkey around and rushed towards me. Stretching out my left palm, I executed the technique, 'Cloud-Barring Hand' and pushed towards him. Suddenly, with a 'chi' sound, he pointed at me with his finger. I felt some pain on the left side of my chest. Then, all my energy left my body."

As the Yellow Browed Monk came to this point in the story, he slowly began to remove his robes, exposing his thin, bony chest. Everyone could see that on the left side of his chest, above his heart, there was a hole roughly an inch deep. Although the hole was long since scabbed over, it was nonetheless clear to everybody how severe the injury he suffered was. Everyone was absolutely astonished that with such a deep wound over his heart, he not only did not die, but had managed to survive to this very day.

The Yellow Browed Monk pointed towards the right side of his chest and said, "Everyone, please take a look." The flesh and skin there were slightly undulating upwards and downwards. Only now did everyone realize that his body structure was a bit different from everyone else's; his heart was closer to the right side than the left. The reason he managed to just barely survive was for this reason.

The Yellow Browed Monk once more put on his cloth robes, then continued. "For a person to have a heart like mine is really an extremely rare occurrence. That youth,

seeing that I did not immediately die upon being struck by his finger on my heart, pulled his donkey back a few steps. A look of great surprise was on his face. I saw the blood flowing from my chest and knew that my life certainly would be lost. I no longer had any fear, and immediately boomed out, 'Little crook, you claim that you know how to use the Vajra Finger. Hmph! The Vajra Finger of the Damo Courtyard, is there such a thing as it injuring the opponent and drawing the opponent's blood but not taking the opponent's life? Your technique is totally wrong. It definitely is not the Vajra Finger!' That youth leapt towards me, once more about to strike at me. At that moment, I couldn't defend myself in the slightest. All I could do was stand there and wait for death. I never would have imagined that the woman would suddenly flick her whip and capture her son's arm with it. I dimly and hazily heard her reprimand her son. 'The Murong family of Gusu actually has such a useless scion as you. Since your finger strike was not perfect, you cannot kill this man. I'll punish you. For the next seven days...' As to what sort of punishment she would assign him for the next seven days, I do not know. By that time, I had already fainted."

Cui Baiquan said in a trembling voice, "Ma...master, afterwards...afterwards, did you ever meet them again?"

The Yellow Browed Monk said, "I am embarrassed to say this. But after that day, I felt extremely downhearted. Such a young man already achieved such great attainment in martial arts. Even if I practiced hard for the rest of my life, I might not be able to catch up to him. After the injury to my chest was healed, I left the territory of the Great Song, and came to far-away Dali. I hid myself under his majesty's protection, and after a few years became a monk. Over these many years, I have passed beyond the point of caring about life or death, and no longer care about my past honors or humiliations. But when I occasionally think back on that event, my heart cannot help but quiver with fear. I really am like a little bird terrified by the twang of a bowstring."

Duan Yu asked, "Master, if that youth lived to this day, he would be in his sixties. He would be Murong Bo, right?"

The Yellow Browed Monk shook his head. "I'm embarrassed to say this, but I don't know. As to whether or not the skill he used to attack me truly was the Vajra Finger, I also could not tell for sure. I only felt that it seemed somewhat different. But regardless of whether or not it was the Vajra Finger, it was extremely powerful...extremely powerful..."

No one spoke. The disdain they had felt towards Cui Baiquan was mostly gone now. They all thought to themselves that for a martial artist of the Yellow Browed Monk's caliber to be in dread of Murong Bo, it was excusable for Cui Baiquan to be terrified out of his wits.

Cui Baiquan said, "Sir, you have an extremely high status, and yet you do not conceal your past inglorious at all. What type of person am I, to not speak for fear of being shamed? I was just about to explain to the prince my reasons for hiding myself here. As no one here is an outsider, I will tell everyone the story." As he said this, his face became extremely agitated. He felt his tongue and his throat become dry. He grabbed his bowl of tea and gulped it down, then took Guo Yanzhi's bowl of tea and drank that down as well. Only then could he continue. "This...this event of mine, happened...happened eighteen years ago..." After he said this, he couldn't help but start glancing outside the window again.

He calmed himself down, then said, "Within the regional capital city of Nanyang, there was a local tyrant surnamed 'Cai'. He was rich but cruel and oppressed the common people. A friend of my martial brother and I was framed and harmed by him. His entire family died at Cai's hands." Guo Yanzhi said, "Martial uncle, are you talking about that crook, Cai Qingtu?" Cui Baiquan said, "Right. Whenever your master speaks of Cai Qingtu, he always gnashes his teeth with hate. Your master wrote many letters of condemnation

and complaint to the local officials, but each time Cai Qingtu would bribe the high officials to suppress and quash the complaints. If your master were to use his soft whip, he could have destroyed Cai Qingtu in a heartbeat. But although he was a lofty hero in the world of the jianghu, in his own hometown, he had a family and a business. He wasn't willing to break the law. I, Cui Baiquan, was totally different. I thieved chickens and stole dogs, *****d and gambled, committed murder and arson. I did everything. That night, I couldn't suppress my anger. I snuck into Cai Qingtu's house and wiped out everyone in his household, numbering over thirty people."

"I started killing at the main gate, and killed all the way until I reached the backyard courtyard. I didn't even spare the female slave gardeners. Entering the courtyard, I saw some light at the window of a small building. I rushed up the building and kicked down the door. It was a study room, and all four walls were filled with books. A pair of two, man and woman, were seated there and were reading."

"The male was in his forties and had handsome features. He wore the clothes of a scholar. The woman appeared very young, but as her back was towards me, I didn't see her face. I saw that she wore a light green outer garment. Judging by the candlelight, she seemed quite pretty and charming. Goddamnit..." Up til now, his words had been refined, not at all in keeping with his normal behavior. He stunned everyone in suddenly letting out such an uncouth remark. Swimming in his memories, Cui Baiquan continued, "...I had just killed thirty odd people in a short amount of time and was in a great mood. I suddenly saw those two bastards, and goddamnit, I thought it was weird. Everyone in Cai Qingtu's family was vicious and thuggish. Where did these two attractive, refined bastards come from? Isn't this like Emperor Tangming and Yang Guifei from the opera skits? I thought it was weird, and wasn't planning to immediately kill them. The man said, "Wife, everything from 'guimei' to

‘wuwang’ is not lined up correctly [tortoise sister to martial king].”

Duan Yu, upon hearing the words, ‘guimei’ to ‘wuwang’, thought to himself, “What the heck is this? What is he talking about?” After thinking for a moment, he came to a realization. “Oh, he means, from ‘guimei’ to ‘wuwang’ [tortoise sister to no rashness]. The man is talking about the I-Ching.” His interested was roused.

Cui Baiquan continued, “That woman muttered to herself for a while, then said, ‘If you go from the northeast corner and slant towards ‘dage’ [elder brother], then turn at ‘zizi’ [elder sister]...is this route possible?” Duan Yu thought to himself, “Elder brother? Elder sister? Oh, he means ‘large road’ and ‘already crossed’.” Suddenly, he was startled all the more. “This woman is clearly talking about the steps within the ‘Graceful Steps Upon the Waves’. Her positioning is a bit off though, so she isn’t totally correct. Can it be that this woman has some sort of relationship with the Dear Goddess of the mountain cave?”

Cui Baiquan continued, “These two kept on talking incessantly, babbling about turtle sisters, brothers-in-law, older sisters, yadda yadda. I got impatient and yelled, ‘Goddamnit, both of you bastards, roll the hell out!’ But both of them acted as though they were deaf and hadn’t heard my words at all. They simply continued to stare intently at that book. The woman said in a soft voice, ‘There are nine steps that need to be taken from here to the elder sister’s house. They can’t be taken.’ I yelled again, ‘Take them, take them, take them! Take as many steps as you need to your grandmother’s house! I’ll send you to meet all eighteen generations of your ancestors!’ Just as I was about to enter the room, that man suddenly clapped his hands and laughed. ‘Brilliant, brilliant! The grandmother is the ‘kun’. Eighteen generations of ancestors...hey, two times nine is eighteen! They should revolve around the ‘kun’ position. We’ve thought through this part of the footwork!’ He

reached out and grabbed an abacus on the table. I don't know what he did, but suddenly three abacus beads flew out towards me. I only felt some pain in my chest, then found my body to be paralyzed and unable to move any more."

"These two still ignored me, and continued to talking about their little brothers and their little swine. My heart was filled with unspeakable fear. My bandit nickname was the 'Golden Abacus', because I always carry with me an abacus forged from gold. Hidden within was a secret spring mechanism which would shoot out seventy seven abacus beads when the mechanism was activated. But the abacus on the table was an ordinary one made from mahogany. The bamboo cross-pieces of the abacus had been broken into countless pieces; clearly, he had used his internal energy to shatter the bamboo cross-pieces, then used his internal energy to agitate the beads and shoot them out. This display of martial arts prowess really was goddamn incredible."

"The more the man and the woman spoke, the happier their voices became. I, on the other hand, grew steadily more afraid. I committed over thirty bloody murders in this house, and now I was stuck here, unable to move, unable to speak. It would be alright if I had to pay with my own life for my murders. But if I were found here, I would be implicating brother Ke as well. The four hours that I spent there were more agonizing than that of ten or twenty years of torture. It wasn't until the chickens began to crow that the man laughed and said, 'Wife, it looks like we won't be able to figure out the next few steps tonight. Let's go!' The woman said, 'This 'Golden Abacus', Master Cui, helped you to come up with such a miraculous solution. We should give him some sort of reward!' I was startled once more. So they had known my identity all along. The man said, 'Since this is the case, let's let him live a few more years. We'll take his life the next time we meet him! He dared to insult you and insult me. We can't just pretend that didn't happen.' As he spoke, he picked up his book, then sent out a palm and

lightly tapped me on the back, unsealing my acupoints. Following this, the two of them flew out of the window. I lowered my head and saw that three holes had appeared in the chest of my clothes. Three abacus beads were neatly and perfectly nailed into my chest. Even if one had used a ruler and other tools, it would be extremely difficult to place them so accurately. Look, look, look. Everyone, take a look at my predicament for yourself.” And as he spoke, he removed his upper body garments.

As everyone looked at him, they couldn’t help but laugh. Two of the abacus beads were planted precisely on top of his nipples, with the other one in between them. Can it be that he wasn’t able to think of a way to remove them, despite all these years having passed? Cui Baiquan shook his head, rebuttoning his clothes. “For these three beads to be placed on my body is really a heavy punishment. At first, I wanted to dig them out with a knife. But as soon as I used the slightest bit of force, I agitated my own meridians and passed out. It took four hours before I was able to wake up. How about using sandpaper or a filing knife to slowly destroy it? It was still so agonizing that I screamed like a goddamn pig. This punishment has followed my spirit and never left my body. Whenever it is about to rain, these three points of my chest are filled with so much unbearable ****ing pain. It’s more accurate than tortoise shell divinations!” Everyone present was both astonished and amused.

Cui Baiquan let out a sigh. “This man said that the next time he sees me, he would take my life. I can’t let him take my life, but if I ever met him again, I can’t prevent him from taking it either. The only thing I could do was to make sure he would never see me again. I had no other choice but to escape far away. I ended up arriving at the South-Subduing Palace. There were many experts here, including Prince Duan, Gao Shengtai, Chu Wanli, and the other bodyguards. Surely, they wouldn’t stand by and do nothing and simply

watch as my life was taken away. When these three beads on my chest began to hurt, I had no choice but to drown the pain in alcohol for a while. Any lofty aspirations, grand ideals, or dreams of becoming a famous man of my time had become totally out of ****ing reach, more distant than the ninth level of the heavens.”

Everyone thought to themselves, “This person’s situation is largely the same as that of the Yellow Browed Monk. The only difference is that one left the secular world and became a monk, whereas the other hid his identity and lived incognito.” Duan Yu asked, “Mr. Huo, how do you know that those two belonged to Gusu’s Murong lineage?” He was used to calling this person ‘Mr. Huo’, and wasn’t able to instantly change his mode of address.

Cui Baiquan scratched his head and said, “That was the hypothesis of my martial brother. After being hit by these three abacus beads, I went to discuss the situation with him. He told me that in the wulin, only Gusu’s Murong family would ‘Use the opponent’s skills, exercising them upon the opponent.’ I use abacus beads to attack others, and so he used abacus beads to attack me. Gusu’s Murong family isn’t a flourishing one. ****! It’s a good thing there’s not a lot of them in the world. If they had thousands of sons and hundreds of grandsons, there would be no others left in the jianghu. Only their family would be left.”

These words were extremely disrespectful to Dali’s Duan family, but no one cared. He continued, “The only famous person from their family is Murong Bo. Forty three years ago, the kid who used the Vajra Finger to harm this respected monk was aged fifteen or sixteen. Eighteen years ago, the man who drilled these three beads into my chest was in his forties. It seems likely that they both were the same person, Murong Bo. I never would have imagined that my martial brother would lose his life to him as well. Yanzhi, how did your master offend him?”

Guo Yanzhi replied, "These past few years, my master had been focused on his business. He would often say, 'harmony brings prosperity'. He never quarreled with anybody. There's no way that he could've offended Gusu's Murong family. We're located in Nanyang; they're located in Suzhou. There's a huge distance between us."

Cui Baiquan said, "Most likely, Murong Bo wasn't able to find me, shrinking, cowardly turtle that I am, and went to ask your master for my location. Your master was a loyal, filial man. He would rather die than reveal my location, and lost his life under Murong Bo's hands. Brother Ke! I harmed you!" As he spoke, tears began to fall from his eyes and he had a runny nose. Sobbing, he said, "Murong Bo...Bo, Bo, Bo! I'll rip your skin off [Bo is a homonym for another Chinese character, meaning to skin]!" After crying for a bit, he turned to Duan Zhengchun and said, "Prince Duan, all I have to say, I have. Thank you for taking care of me over the past few years and not exposing my identity. I feel extremely grateful towards you, but it will be difficult for me to repay you. I am heading to Gusu right now!" Astonished, Duan Zhengchun said, "You are going to Gusu?"

Cui Baiquan said, "Right! My martial brother and I are as close as blood brothers. How can I not avenge his murder? Yanzhi, let's go!" As he spoke, he clasped his hands towards every person, then turned around and left. Guo Yanzhi also paid his respects to everyone present then followed him out.

This turn of events was completely out of everyone's expectations. They saw how terrified Cui Baiquan was of Gusu's Murong family. But when he spoke of going to avenge his martial brother, despite the fact that he knew he was going to his death, he didn't show an iota of fear. Everyone secretly felt respect for him within their hearts. Duan Zhengchun called out, "Gentlemen, please wait. Brother Guo has travelled such a long distance to get here. Please take a night's rest at my humble abode first, then leave on the morrow." Cui Baiquan halted, turned around,

and said, "Yes! We'll follow your orders, prince, and trouble you for one last meal. Yanzhi, let's go drinking!" He led Guo Yanzhi away.

Emperor Baoding said to Duan Zhengchun, "Brother Chun, tomorrow, go with Ministers Hua, Fan, and Ba to the Shenjie monastery of Luliang prefecture. Hold a memorial service on my behalf for Master Xuanbei." Duan Zhengchun agreed. Huizhen and Huiguan kowtowed, showing their thanks. Emperor Baoding said to Duan Zhengchun, "After paying your respects to Abbot Wuye, wait at the Shenjie monastery for the arrival of the other master monks of Shaolin, then give them my return letter for Abbot Xuanci." He said to Ba Tianshi, "Prepare a pair of letters. One will go to Abbot Xuanci, the other will go to Abbot Wuye. Also prepare gifts for both of them." Ba Tianshi bowed and acknowledged the order. Emperor Baoding continued, "Escort these two eminent monks to their rooms so that they can have some rest." After Ba Tianshi escorted Huizhen and Huiguan out, Emperor Baoding said, "Dali's Duan family came from the wulin of the central plains. We have never dared to forget our origins, despite the passage of centuries. When friends from the wulin of the central plains come here, we always happily welcome them with lavish ceremony. But our ancestors laid down an extremely strict rule. The scions of the Duan family are completely forbidden from getting involved in the enmities of the jianghu of the central plains. Although we will not and cannot ignore the death of Master Xuanbei, we will leave the question of getting revenge up to Shaolin. We cannot interfere." Duan Zhengchun said, "Yes, your brother understands."

The Yellow Browed Monk said, "It really is very difficult to decide what our proper course of action here is. We must assist Shaolin, but we cannot get involved in any revenge killings. Although Gusu's Murong family does not have many people, as a famous, aristocratic wulin family, they certainly have a huge number of friends and affiliates. For Shaolin to

be open enemies of Gusu's Murong family would be a shocking, earth-shattering event of wulin. Blood will spray like rain, and the wind will reek of flesh. Who knows how many people will perish. For the past few years, the country of Dali has been peaceful and prosperous. If we get too deeply involved in this spat, I'm afraid that in future years, there will be many people who come to Dali for the purpose of settling scores."

Emperor Baoding said, "Master, your words are most correct. Our only option is to act totally in accordance with the righteous path, while also showing as much forbearance as we can. Brother Chun, you must always remember these four words: 'Maintain righteousness, exercise forbearance.'" Duan Zhengchun cupped his hands in acknowledgment of the lesson.

The Yellow Browed Monk said, "My two worthy brothers, I must depart now. I need to take a stroll at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge." Everyone was astonished. Emperor Baoding said, "Martial brother, what business do you have at the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge? Who do you want to take with you?" The Yellow Browed Monk laughed. "I won't even take my two disciples. My two worthy brothers, why don't you try to guess why I am going there?" Seeing a cheerful smile on his face, Emperor Baoding and Duan Zhengchun felt that it probably wasn't some dangerous affair. And yet, they still weren't able to guess what it might be. The Yellow Browed Monk smiled towards Duan Yu. "Worthy nephew, I'll wager you can guess what it is."

Duan Yu was startled. "Why is it that I can guess what it is, despite my uncle and father being unable to?" But suddenly, the answer came to him. Laughing, he said, "Master, you are going to investigate that game of chess!" The Yellow Browed Monk laughed loudly. "Precisely. I have no idea as to how, precisely, I defeated Crown Prince Yanqing in that game of chess. Why did he kill one of his own eyes?" Duan Yu shook his head. "I don't know either." The Yellow

Browed Monk said, "Can it be that there was some oddity within the stone house, or on the blue stone? This humble monk must go take a second look!"

For students of chess, after each game, regardless of victory or defeat, they would go and ponder and deliberate the moves of that match. They would consider where they made weak moves or unwise moves, or where they attacked too aggressively or moved too sluggishly. They wouldn't feel comfortable until after they had totally understood the intricacies of the game. Not to mention, the Yellow Browed Monk won this game of chess in an extremely strange manner. If he couldn't discover the secret to this game of chess, it would most likely vex him for the rest of his life.

Emperor Baoding immediately returned to his own palace. The Yellow Browed Monk instructed his two disciples to return to the Flower Gathering Monastery, then went by himself to the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. He reassembled the blue stone chessboard which was shattered by Crown Prince Yanqing, then began pondering each move step by step.

After escorting Emperor Baoding and the Yellow Browed Monk out of the palace, Duan Zhengchun returned to his own room, intending to discuss the day's events with his wife. Unfortunately, Dao Baifeng, still angry with him over the discovery that he had another illegitimate daughter, in the form of Zhong Ling, had locked the door and wouldn't let him in. Duan Zhengchun begged her from outside to open up for a long time. She replied, "If you don't leave immediately, I'm going back to the Hollow Jade Monastery!"

Helpless, Duan Zhengchun could only return to the study room, sitting down gloomily. He suddenly thought of Zhong Ling, and wondered if Zhong Wanchou and the Divine Crocodile could rescue her. Chu Wanli and the others had left to investigate, but hadn't returned to make a report yet. His mind was uneasy. He stroked the golden box which Gan Baobao had returned to him. Staring at her slender, fine

handwriting, his mind returned to a time seventeen years past, where the two of them had shared joy and happiness so overwhelming, it had penetrated to their marrows. Then he thought of how she had painfully waited for him for so long, before she finally was forced to marry Zhong Wanchou. He couldn't help but feel a deep ache within his heart. "At that time, she was only a seventeen year old girl. Her parents had always treated her unkindly. She was carrying my child within her, out of wedlock. What else could she do?"

The more he thought, the more miserable he felt. Suddenly, he remembered the words which Dao Baifeng had earlier said to Minister Hua. "This tunnel passes by Madame Zhong's bedroom. If you don't collapse it, I'm afraid that one of the gentlemen currently present will henceforth go tunnel his way there every night from now on." He immediately ordered one of his servants to secretly summon two of Minister Hua's most able family warriors, admonishing him to keep everything secret.

Within his own study room, Duan Yu's mind was fully occupied with running through all the strange events which had recently transpired. First, his wedding engagement with Mu Wanqing, then his discovery that she was his sister. Even more bizarre, Zhong Ling was also his sister. Zhong Ling had been kidnapped by Yun Zhonghe, and whether or not she had escaped his clutches was as of yet unknown. His heart was filled with worry. Then, he thought of Murong Bo and his wife studying the art of the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves'. He wondered what sort of connection they might have with his Dear Goddess from the cave. Could it be that they were disciples of the Xiaoyao Sect [literally, 'Carefree' Sect]? Are they the people whom the Dear Goddess has ordered me to kill? They have attained such an incredibly high level of martial arts. For someone to expect me to try and kill them will be a joke of colossal proportions.

His mind wandered to his imprisonment within the stone house. Thank goodness he hadn't committed any incestuous acts. It really was a stroke of luck. In addition, he had become much more familiar with the footwork of the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves' as well. However, he had been slacking with regards to doing the homework which the Dear Goddess had assigned him. He immediately reached within his bosom, intending to pull the manuscript out. As soon as his fingers brushed its surface, he realized that something was wrong. He quickly extracted the manuscript, then let out a series of cries, "Aiyo! Aiyo!" The scroll had long since been torn into many scattered pieces. Upon unwrapping it, he found that all the pieces were jumbled together. How could this be readable at all? Of the scattered pieces of parchment, perhaps only thirty percent of the original remained. The damage done to the actual diagrams and instructions was even more severe. Duan Yu's entire body trembled, as though he had been thrown into a room built of ice. He thought to himself, "How...how could this have happened."

Only after a long time had passed did he vaguely recollect that after being imprisoned by the man in green, his entire body had suddenly turned unbearably hot. He had wildly ripped and torn at his clothes. Later, as he ran and jumped about madly, he had continued to wildly tear at his clothes. In his dazed state, how could he tell the difference between clothes and manuscripts? Naturally, he tore at everything, ripping them into little pieces then casting them aside.

He stared stupidly at the image of the naked girl on the scroll, whose arms and legs had been torn off with the parchment they were drawn upon. And yet, there was a feel of relief in his heart as well. "The manuscript has been destroyed. I can no longer learn the martial arts written within it. It's not that I refuse to obey Dear Goddess's orders, but that I am unable to. All that stuff about exterminating

the disciples of the Xiaoyao Sect no longer apply.” He threw the remaining scraps of parchment into the fireplace, then lit the fire and burned them to ash. He thought to himself, “The naked pictures are badly damaged. Each time I look at them, I would be profaning the memory of the Dear Goddess. It is heaven’s will that it be destroyed in flame.”

He saw that it was now late at night, and headed to his mother’s room. He wanted to have a good conversation with her and share a meal. Arriving at her room, he saw that the door was shut tightly. The female servant in charge of waiting on the princess giggled, “The princess is sleeping. Please come back tomorrow.” Duan Yu thought to himself, “Oh, right. Father must be inside.” Turning away, he left, intending to find Mu Wanqing and have a conversation with her instead. But after taking a few steps, he decided that it would be best for him to avoid her for now. For him to visit her now would only make her feel sadder. Bored and aimless, he strolled towards the inner garden.

By now, the moon appeared. He sat for a while at the pavilion by the side of the pond, watching as the curved crescent moon rose up into the sky from the east. He thought to himself that at this moment, the moonlight would also be descending upon the jade cliffs of Mt. Wuliang. After a few more hours, a multicolored long sword would appear on those jade cliffs, pointing to the abode of the Dear Goddess. Just as he was beginning to fall into a spellbound trance, he heard a soft whistle come from outside of the walls. Listening, he heard the sound a few more times. In the past, he wouldn’t have paid such a thing any mind. But in the past few days, he had undergone many things and broadened his experiences. He thought to himself, “Can it be that a person of the jianghu is sending a secret signal?”

After a short period of time, the whistle came again. Suddenly, a shadow flashed by the peony flower terrace. As it reached the wall, it leapt on top of it. Duan Yu involuntarily

cried out, "Sister Wan!" The person was Mu Wanqing. He watched as she leapt down from the wall, to the other side.

Duan Yu cried out a second time, "Sister Wan!" He rushed to the spot where Mu Wanqing had leapt onto the wall, but he himself, of course, didn't have that sort of ability. There was a door next to him, leading out of the garden, but it was bolted and locked shut with an iron padlock. He could do nothing but loudly shout out, "Sister Wan! Sister Wan!"

Only to hear Mu Wanqing loudly shout back from the other side of the wall, "Why do you keep on calling my name? I never want to see you again! I'm leaving with my mom!" Duan Yu anxiously said, "Don't leave! No matter what, you mustn't leave!" Mu Wanqing did not reply.

After a while, he heard the voice of an older woman say from the other side, "Wan'er, let's go! Alas! It's useless." Mu Wanqing was still silent. Duan Yu knew that this woman must be Qin Hongmian. He shouted, "Aunt Qin, please come in."

Qin Hongmian said, "Come in? For what purpose? So that your mother can kill me?"

Duan Yu wasn't able to formulate a reply. He hit the door hard, calling out, "Sister Wan, Sister Wan! Don't go! Let's slowly think of an idea." Mu Wanqing replied, "What idea can we come up with? Heaven itself has no ideas!" After pondering a moment, she called out, "I have an idea. Are you interested?" Duan Yu happily replied, "Great! What's the plan?"

With two 'chi' sounds, the blade of a thin blue sabre was inserted within the openings at the side of the doorway, then cut the hinges off. Following that, with a pair of 'peng' sounds, the gate was pushed open. Mu Wanqing stood in the doorway. Within her hands, she held that thin blue asura sabre. She said, "Stretch out your neck and let me chop it in half. Then I'll immediately kill myself. When we reincarnate, we won't be brother and sister. That way, we can become man and wife."

Duan Yu was so frightened that he was stupefied. In a quavering voice, he replied, "This...this isn't...isn't workable!"

Mu Wanning said, "I'm willing. Why aren't you? Alternately, you can kill me first, then take your own life." As she spoke, she handed an asura sabre over towards him. Duan Yu hurriedly took two steps back. "No way, no way!"

Mu Wanning slowly turned around. Grasping her mother's arm, she quickly walked away. Duan Yu blankly stared as their silhouettes disappeared within the darkness of the night. For a long, long time, he did not move.

Slowly, the moon rose until it was in the middle of the sky, but he continued to stand there without moving. He suddenly felt a tightness at the back of his neck, and then he was lifted up in the sky by someone. A quiet voice laughed. "Do you wanna die, or do you wanna live? If you wanna be my master, you'll be a dead master. But if you're willing to be my apprentice, you'll be a living apprentice." It was the Divine Crocodile's voice.

Duan Zhengchun, with two of Hua Hegen's most skilled subordinates, swiftly rode to the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge. These two subordinates, having helped Hua Hegen dig the tunnel, knew where the entrance to it was. They led him to it, then shifted away the branches and twigs which they had used to camouflage the entrance. One of them said, "Let this humble one guide you." Duan Zhengchun said, "No need! The two of you shall just wait for me here."

Just as he was about to crawl into the tunnel, he suddenly saw a shadow flash by from behind a large tree to the west. The movement was extremely quick. Duan Zhengchun immediately utilized his energy and charged over there. He cried out in a low voice, "Who are you?" Behind the large tree, a man whispered back, "Prince, I am Cui Baiquan!" He stepped out from behind the tree.

Surprised, Duan Zhengchun said, "Brother Cui, what are you doing here?" Cui Baiquan said, "This humble one heard

that your honored daughter had been abducted. I came with my martial nephew Guo in order to look for her. I saw some clues on the road and deduced that the young miss most likely fled back here. But that villain is continuing to pursue her and not letting up.”

Duan Zhengchun’s mind was suddenly enlightened. “This Cui Baiquan is a man who distinguishes between benevolence and mistreatment. He had hidden himself in my manor for all these years, and consequently feels that he owes me a debt of gratitude. He is about to go seek out Gusu’s Murong family for revenge; this is tantamount to throwing his life away. He hoped to be able to find my daughter Ling’er, and in this way repay the gift of protection which I had given him for the past ten or so years.”

He immediately bowed deeply. “Brother Cui, I can’t thank you enough for the righteousness you have displayed.” Cui Baiquan replied, “I’ll go search for her over there.” In a flash, he entered the forested woods, demonstrating an exceptionally capable skill in qinggong.

Duan Zhengchun thought to himself, “Brother Cui’s martial arts is not inferior at all to Wanli or Danchen.” Returning to the tunnel entrance, he entered the tunnel. After crawling for a while, he came to a fork in the tunnel. The two subordinates had already told him earlier that the northeastern tunnel led to the stone house which had previously imprisoned Duan Yu and Mu Wanning, and that the northwestern tunnel led to Madame Zhong’s bedroom. He immediately crawled in the northwestern direction. Arriving at the end of the tunnel, he gently lifted up the board above his head by a few inches. Bright light appeared before him. He slowly peered into the crack, only to see a pair of purple, flower-embroidered shoes resting on the floor. Duan Zhengchun felt a great shock in his heart, then pushed the board up another two inches.

He heard Gan Baobao let out a long sigh. After a while, she quietly said, “If you weren’t a prince, but were instead a

farmer or a hunter, or a philandering little thief, or a bandit who plundered homes, I would still have followed you...I would have followed you my entire life..." Following this, a few teardrops fell, descending on the floorboard next to her flower-embroidered shoes.

Duan Zhengchun felt a gush of warm feeling rise from the pit of his stomach. He thought to himself, "I won't be a prince anymore. I'll be a thief or a bandit and have you follow me for the rest of our lives. What's so good about being a prince anyhow?"

Only to hear Gan Baobao continue, "Can it be...can it be that I really will never see you again for the rest of my life? Not even once? I...I'm better off dead. Brother Chun, Brother Chun...do you miss me at all?" These soft laments were truly heart-rending and deeply moving. Duan Zhengchun couldn't resist from quietly whispering, "Baobao...my beloved Baobao..." Gan Baobao was startled. She stood up, then immediately let out a sigh. She mumbled to herself, "I'm dreaming again. I dreamed that you were calling to me." Duan Zhengchun said in a low voice, "Beloved Baobao, I really am calling out to you. I've always been thinking of you and missing you."

Gao Baobao let out a startled cry. "Brother Chun, is it really you?" Duan Zhengchun pushed the floorboard aside and crawled out. In a low voice, he said, "Beloved Baobao, it really is me!" Gan Baobao, upon suddenly seeing Duan Zhengchun appear before her, lost all color in her face. She took a few steps forward, her entire body trembling. Duan Zhengchun rushed forwards and embraced her in her arms. Gan Baobao's body suddenly swayed, and then she passed out.

Duan Zhengchun hurriedly massaged her 'Renzhong' acupoint. Slowly, Gan Baobao began to come to. She felt that her body was in Duan Zhengchun's embrace, while he was kissing her face. She was filled with such joy that her entire body was about to explode from it. Her mind in a

daze, she whispered, "Brother Chun, Brother Chun...I'm dreaming again." Duan Zhengchun tightly embraced her warm, soft body. He whispered in her ear, "Beloved Baobao, you aren't dreaming. I'm the one dreaming."

Suddenly, a coarse voice erupted from outside the door. "Who?! Who's inside the room?! I heard a male voice!" It was Zhong Wanchou's voice. Duan Zhengchun and Gan Baobao were both startled. Gan Baobao loudly replied, "I'm inside! What's this nonsense about a male voice or a female voice? You're babbling again!"

Duan Zhengchun whispered into her ear, "Run away with me. I'll be a thief or a bandit. I won't be a prince anymore." Absolutely jubilant, Gan Baobao whispered back, "I'll be a thief's wife or a bandit's wife. Even if it's just for one day, it would be wonderful."

Without his wife's permission, Zhong Wanchou didn't dare to enter his wife's room. But from a window, he saw a man's shadow inside the room. He loudly cried out, "You have a man inside your room! I...I see him!" He no longer cared about whether or not his wife had given permission and knocked the door open with a flying kick.

The back of Duan Yu's neck had been seized by the Divine Crocodile. Held up in mid-air, he couldn't move in the slightest. He had only finished practicing one part of the 'Divine Art of the Northern Darkness', the 'Shoutaiyinfei' part. He could only use the 'Shaoshang' acupoint on his thumb to fight with people. In addition, the opponent was using all his might in seizing him; how could he drain his energy away, with all of his other acupoints unable to draw internal energy? He was just about to shout, but the Divine Crocodile stretched out his left hand and covered his mouth.

Holding him, the Divine Crocodile raced away. He did not stop until he had arrived in a quiet, secluded place, far away from the South Subduing Palace. He put Duan Yu back down, but did not release the back of his neck, fearing that if he

did, Duan Yu would utilize that bizarre set of footwork to flee.

Duan Yu let out a bitter smile. "Evidently, you changed your mind. You don't want to be my disciple after all; you'd rather be a bastard son of a turtle." The Divine Crocodile replied, "Says who? First, return to me my eight kowtows and expel me from your sect, releasing me from your tutelage. Then kowtow to me eight more times and accept me as your master. We'll do this orderly and by the book. That way, there'll be no issue of me being a bastard son of a turtle."

Duan Yu couldn't help but laugh silently to himself. "No way! At this moment, I've been captured by you and don't have the ability to defend myself. Go ahead and kill me!" The Divine Crocodile spat. "Bah! I won't fall for your trick! Your old man definitely won't kill you while you are helpless and give people a reason to call me a bastard son of a turtle! Do you think I'm stupid or something?" Duan Yu replied, "You are so sharp! So extremely smart!"

The Divine Crocodile had come up with a 'brilliant plan' that would allow him to flawlessly and properly achieve his hearts desire in terms of formalities. How could he have known that the other person would rather die than kowtow to him eighteen times? The brilliant plan he had spent days concocting was now totally useless. He couldn't help but feel extremely anxious and indecisive.

Duan Yu said, "According to the rules of the Southern Seas sect, can a disciple kill his own master?" The Divine Crocodile replied, "Of course he can't! A master can kill his disciple, but a disciple killing his master is unheard of!" Duan Yu continued, "So does a disciple have to listen to and obey his master, or does the master have to obey the disciple?" The Divine Crocodile replied, "Naturally, the disciple has to obey the master. After you accept me as your master, you'll need to obey me in all things." Duan Yu laughed. "Right now, you are still my disciple. I told you to

go rescue your master-wife. Have you accomplished this or not?"

The Divine Crocodile said, "****! I started to fight with Number Four just as my master-wife's old man rushed over. He took the opportunity to seize her back." Duan Yu, hearing that Zhong Ling had already escaped Yun Zhonghe's vile grasp, was filled with joy.

The Divine Crocodile continued, "Next, I started to fight with my master-wife's old man. After we battled for a bit, he didn't want to fight anymore. My master-wife had already run away as well. Number Four said that we should go to the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge and kill Zhong Wanchou." Duan Yu asked, "Why's that?" The Divine Crocodile replied, "This important task cannot go undone! Otherwise I, Yue Number Two, will never be able to raise my head in the jianghu ever again, and be looked down upon by everyone." Baffled, Duan Yu said, "What type of logic is that? Number Four was just messing with you. You don't need to listen to him."

The Divine Crocodile replied, "No, no! Number Four is looking after my well-being. If you don't understand the logic of this, let me instruct you. That little girl is now my master-wife, putting her a generation up above me. That means her old man is two generations above me. ****! What type of shitty creature is Zhong Wanchou, for him to be two generations my senior? I gotta kill him! Number Four also said that the reason he was planning to kill Zhong Wanchou and steal his wife was because of his loyalty to our group, the 'Four Great Evils'. He was totally doing this for my sake, charging ahead without caring about his own safety and risking everything for me."

Duan Yu was all the more baffled. He asked, "How so?" The Divine Crocodile replied, "Zhong Wanchou's wife, being my master-wife's mother, is also two generations above me. But if Number Four made her his wife instead, she would become the wife of the junior brother of I, Yue Number Two.

That would make her my sister-in-law. Her daughter would naturally be a generation beneath me, making her my niece. You would be my niece's husband, making you my nephew-in-law. Naturally, you'd also be one generation lower than me. I'd address you as 'master', and you'd address me as 'uncle'. Wouldn't that put both of us in a great position? Haha! What a brilliant idea!"

Duan Yu burst into loud laughter. The Divine Crocodile said, "Let's go, let's go! Let's quickly go and take care of this important bit of business. There can never be a person in the world who is two generations above Yue Number Two!" Grabbing Duan Yu by the hand, he flew towards the direction of the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge.

Duan Zhengchun heard Zhong Wanchou kick down the door to enter the room. A thought flashed by his mind. "I can't kill him!" He gently pried himself loose from Gan Baobao's embrace and jumped back into the tunnel, hurriedly replacing the wooden board.

With his large sabre in hand, Zhong Wanchou rushed into the bedroom, only to see Gan Baobao by herself in the room. He hurriedly checked the wardrobe, underneath the bed, and behind the door. He checked every conceivable place where a person might hide. Forget about finding a male, he wasn't even able to find half the shadow of a ghost. He was filled with total astonishment. Gan Baobao furiously said, "You've come to bully me again! Quick, just go ahead and kill me cleanly with a cut of your sabre!" Not finding a man inside the room, Zhong Wanchou had been filled with happiness. He hurriedly threw aside his sabre and laughed heartily. "Wife, my vision must've been blurry. I must've drank a few too many cups of wine earlier!" But even as he was saying this, he continued to peer here and there.

Suddenly, the sound of frantic footsteps came from outside. Zhong Ling cried loudly, "Mother! Mother!" She flew into the room. Yun Zhonghe's voice pursued her in. "Even if

you run to the ends of the world, I'll still find and capture you!" With quick footsteps, he followed her in.

Zhong Ling cried out, "Daddy, this bad man...this bad man is chasing me again!" In the course of running away from Yun Zhonghe, she had long since exhausted herself. Fortunately, she was familiar with every nook and cranny of her own home, and so was able to dodge here and hide there. Yun Zhonghe on the other hand, in this twisting maze of secret paths and passageways, wasn't able to utilize his qinggong abilities fully. This was the only reason she was able to escape into her mother's bedroom. Yun Zhonghe, seeing both Zhong Wanchou and his wife in the room, was very pleasantly surprised. He thought to himself that this was an excellent opportunity to kill Zhong Wanchou, then carry off both Madame Zhong and Zhong Ling.

Zhong Wanchou fired off three palms in a row, but all three were sidestepped by Yun Zhonghe. Yun Zhonghe circled past the table to pursue Zhong Ling. He thought to himself, "First, let me take care of the little girl. The next step after that would be to kill her father and capture her mother. That way, I won't give her a chance to run away." Zhong Ling cried out, "Hey, you bamboo-pole, if you keep on chasing me, I'm going to start tickling you!" Yun Zhonghe was startled, then called out, "You'll tickle me? I'd like to see you try!" As he spoke, he threw himself through the air towards her.

That day when Zhong Ling had been abducted by Yun Zhonghe, she had struggled with all her might. But how could she escape his grasp? She was terrified to death. She heard the Divine Crocodile rush after them from far away, and heard him loudly call out, "Master-wife! Master-wife! Stretch out your hand and scratch his armpit! This skinny bamboo pole is terrified of being tickled!" Zhong Ling thought to herself, "Tickling? I'm an expert at that skill!" Stretching out her hand, she was just about to tickle his armpit. But Yun Zhonghe had also heard the Divine

Crocodile's shout. Even before she had startled to tickle him, he couldn't help but begin to laugh. While laughing, he was no longer able to run as quickly as before, and the Divine Crocodile was able to catch up to him.

Yun Zhonghe said, "Yue Number Three! You've fallen for that guy's tricks!" The Divine Crocodile retorted, "What are you babbling about, tricks this and tricks that? Hurry up and let go of my master-wife, or I'll give you a taste of my crocodile fang scissors!" Out of options, Yun Zhonghe was forced to put Zhong Ling down. Catching him off-guard, Zhong Ling startled to tickle him. Turning his waist away, Yun Zhonghe laughed so hard that he ran out of breath. The more he laughed, the more vigorously Zhong Ling tickled. Between laughs, Yun Zhonghe began to cough. The Divine Crocodile said, "Master-wife, please spare him! If you keep on doing this and if this goes on for much longer, he'll suffocate to death from laughter!" Zhong Ling thought this was really bizarre. This evil person's martial arts skill was of such a high level. How could he be literally tickled to death by someone? She replied, "I don't believe you! I want to try and see if he can really be tickled to death!" The Divine Crocodile said, "That won't do! If you tickle him to death, he won't be able to come to life again. The weak spot of Yun Zhonghe's martial arts is at the 'Tianquan' [Heavenly Spring] acupoint underneath his armpit. It can't be touched!"

Upon hearing his words, Zhong Ling ceased her assaults on the crook of his armpit. Yun Zhonghe rose to his feet, then suddenly spat towards the Divine Crocodile. He cursed, "You damned crocodile, you ugly alligator! Why'd you expose the weak spot of my martial arts to an outsider?!" Zhong Ling said, "Wow, now you're cussing at people?" She stretched out her hand to tickle him again, but unexpectedly, it didn't work this time. Yun Zhonghe sent out a flying kick that sent her flying far away.

The Divine Crocodile helped Zhong Ling stand up. He said, "Master-wife, does it hurt?" Before Zhong Ling had a chance to respond, Zhong Wanchou rushed towards them, his large sabre in hand. He cried out, "Stupid girl! What's the point of you dying here?" The Divine Crocodile turned his head and barked out, "****, man! Why the hell are you screaming obscenities?" Zhong Wanchou angrily replied, "I'm scolding my daughter! What the hell does it have to do with you?" The Divine Crocodile was totally enraged. Pointing at Zhong Wanchou, he roared, "You...you thieving dog! You want to take advantage of me? I...I, Yue Number Two, am going to go all out on you!" Zhong Wanchou replied, "How am I taking advantage of you?" The Divine Crocodile replied, "She's my master-wife. That means she's a generation above me. There's nothing I can do about that. But you dare to call yourself her father. This...this...you... doesn't this mean you're two generations above me!? Yue Number Two is a respected senior in the Southern Seas. Everyone politely addresses me as 'grandpa' or 'ancestor'. But ever since I arrived at the Central Plains, I've become a generation or two lower than everybody. This old man won't stand for it! I won't stand for it no matter what!"

Zhong Wanchou replied, "If you won't stand for it, then you won't stand for it. She's my birth daughter. That naturally makes me her old man. What's this crap about 'calling myself' her father?" The Divine Crocodile craned his head to glance at both him and his daughter, then said, "Naturally, you're 'calling yourself' her old man. My master-wife is spectacularly beautiful. But you're as ugly as sin. How could you possibly be her old man? She definitely wasn't conceived by you, she was conceived by some other bloke! You're not really her 'old man', you are a fake 'old man'!" Listening to his words, Zhong Wanchou was so enraged that his face turned black with rage. Raising up his sabre, he chopped at the Divine Crocodile.

Zhong Ling hurriedly said, "Daddy, this person rescued me from the hands of that bad man! Don't kill him!"

The flames of Zhong Wanchou's fury towered above the sky. He roared out, "Damn girl! I always suspected that you weren't really my daughter! Even this huge dumbass knows it to be true! How can it be false? First I'll kill him, then I'll kill you, and last of all I'll kill your mother!"

Zhong Ling saw that the two had begun to fight, and that victory or defeat would take some time to be determined. She loudly cried out, "Hey, Yue Number Three! You aren't allowed to hurt my daddy!" She called out again, "Daddy, you can't hurt Yue Number Three!" Then she walked away.

By the time she reached the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge, she was totally exhausted. As soon as she arrived at her own room she immediately fell asleep. She remained asleep until midnight, when she was awoken by Yun Zhonghe's shouts and calls. He was searching through every single room, one after the other. She had hurriedly gotten up and ran away.

At this time, Zhong Ling suspected that she wouldn't be able to get close enough to Yun Zhonghe to tickle him without being captured. She suddenly saw the plank covering the tunnel. Remembering how she was kidnapped via this tunnel by Hua Hegen, she immediately ran over there and lifted up the wooden plank then threw herself into the tunnel.

Yun Zhonghe hurriedly jumped in after her. After crawling for less than ten feet, his hand suddenly fell upon a thin, slender ankle. He heard Zhong Ling call out, "Aiyo!" Kicking frantically, she tried to kick him loose. But how could Yun Zhonghe, as ecstatic as he was, let her go? Exerting some of his upper body strength, he gave a strong pull, trying to pull her towards him. But unexpectedly, Zhong Ling let out another cry of 'Aiyo' and didn't budge in the slightest. It seemed as though someone in front of her had grabbed her as well. At this moment, Yun Zhonghe felt a tight grasp

settle around his own two ankles, and was himself being pulled out by someone else. He heard Zhong Wanchou call out, "Get out, get out!"

Zhong Wanchou, worried about his daughter, had also rushed into the tunnel. Zhong Wanchou gave two tugs but was unable to budge him. He was just about to exercise his strength when he, too, felt his ankles being seized by someone else. A surge of energy ran through his body, trying to pull him out. The Divine Crocodile's hoarse voice was heard. "You ugly, horse-faced bastard, how dare you 'call yourself' my master-wife's father?! You want to put yourself two generations above me? I'm going to kill you today, no matter what!"

As it were, the Divine Crocodile had just arrived, with Duan Yu in tow. From outside the room, he had watched as Zhong Ling, Yun Zhonghe, and Zhong Wanchou successively jumped into the hole. He thought to himself that there was nothing more important, at this moment in time, than killing this "fellow who dares calls himself my master-wife's father". He immediately rushed into the house and jumped into the tunnel as well, seizing hold of Zhong Wanchou's feet.

Duan Yu hurriedly rushed into the room as well. He said to Madame Zhong, "Aunt Zhong, the important thing right now is to help little sister Zhong Ling." Just as he was about to jump into the tunnel as well, somebody suddenly gave his body a push. He immediately fell down.

A female voice cried out, "Number Three, Number Four, get out of there now! Our leader has sent instructions forbidding you guys from killing each other!" It was "No Evil Left Undone", Ye Erniang. She had received orders from Duan Yanqing to come and collect Yun Zhonghe and the Divine Crocodile. But she had arrived a bit late, and saw Yun Zhonghe wriggling into the tunnel, followed shortly by Zhong Wanchou and the Divine Crocodile. She knew that, earlier, the Divine Crocodile was trying to pursue and kill Yun Zhonghe. Yun Zhonghe's martial arts was inferior to the

Divine Crocodile. If he were to be really killed, their leader would definitely be absolutely infuriated. After calling out a few more times, and seeing that the Divine Crocodile did not respond, she too jumped into the hole after them. Grabbing the Divine Crocodile's feet, she prepared to exert her strength and pull him out.

Duan Yu cried out, "Hey hey, you guys can't kill sister Zhong Ling! Originally, she was my fiancée. Now she's my sister!" But the cries and shouts coming from the tunnel were chaotic and muddled. He couldn't tell who was calling out what. He thought to himself that with three of the most evil people in the world in that tunnel, Zhong Ling was in a very precarious situation. He felt that she had treated him with loyalty and affection; even though he did not know martial arts, he was willing to stake his life in order to rescue her. He immediately threw himself towards the tunnel opening. Grabbing onto Ye Erniang's ankles, he prepared to pull her out.

As he clenched his hands around her ankles, his hands naturally settled around the location on Ye Erniang's ankles, known as the "Shouyishu". This was the location of a major acupoint, the 'Sanyinjiao' ['Three Lunar Crossings'] acupoint of the 'Zutaiyinpijing' ['Lunar Foot and Spleen Channel']. The intersections were of the 'Zushaoyinshenjing' ['Younger Lunar Foot and Kidney Channel'], the 'Zutaiyinpijing', and the 'Zujueyinxinbaojing' ['Lunar Foot and Pericardium Channel']. The 'Shaoshang' acupoint of his thumb was resting on the 'Sanyinjiao' acupoint of Ye Erniang's ankle. As the two of them simultaneously exerted their energy, Ye Erniang's internal energy immediately rushed out and entered Duan Yu's body.

In the narrow confines of the tunnel, it wasn't easy to turn around. Yun Zhonghe had seized Zhong Ling's ankles, Zhong Wanchou had viciously grabbed on to Yun Zhonghe's ankles, the Divine Crocodile had latched on to Zhong Wanchou's ankles, Ye Erniang had snatched the Divine

Crocodile's ankles, and at the very end of the chain, Duan Yu was holding on to Ye Erniang's ankles. Aside from Zhong Ling, everybody in the tunnel was using all of their strength to pull out the person in front of them. Zhong Ling did not have much internal energy, and at first, it seemed as though she was going to be easily pulled out by Yun Zhonghe. But somehow, it seemed as though someone in front of her had tightly grabbed onto her, preventing her from being pulled out!

Everyone in this human chain had the 'Shaoshang' acupoint on their thumbs attached to the 'Sanyinjiao' ankle acupoints of the person in front of them. As Ye Erniang's internal energy flowed towards Duan Yu, it carried with it the internal energies of the Divine Crocodile, Zhong Wanchou, Yun Zhonghe, and Zhong Ling. Zhong Ling didn't have much internal energy to begin with, so it was no big deal for her. But the other four people were terrified out of their wits and starting to kick like crazy, trying to escape the hold of the person behind them. But they were so tightly grabbed that they couldn't shake loose no matter what. The more urgently they exercised their internal energy, the more quickly it flew away from them.

Yun Zhonghe only felt that a stream of energy was flowing from Zhong Ling's ankle to him, and then passing through his own ankle further down the chain. He thought to himself that it was extremely strange that the little kid had such profound internal energy. Fortunately for him, even while internal energy was dissipating from his ankles, he was receiving a constant injection from his hands around her own. Naturally, no matter what he was unwilling to let go of Zhong Ling's ankles, for fear that once he did, he wouldn't be able to catch her again. Zhong Wanchou and the rest had the exact same ideas as well. As their hearts began to grow more and more fearful, their grips grew tighter and tighter as well. It was similar to how a drowning person will grab onto anything they can and refuse to let go no matter what.

Nobody in the tunnel could see a single thing. It was filled with the clamor of their shouts. "Our leader has summoned you!" "Let go of me!" "Your old man is gonna butcher you!" "Whaddya grabbing on to me for? Let go now!" "Mom! Mom! Daddy!" Towards the end, they began to feel that although the stream of energy entering their body from their hands was beginning to weaken, the energy flowing out of their bodies from their feet did not slacken in the slightest. This caused them to be all the more fearful.

Duan Yu pulled for a long time, and noticed that the internal energy continuously gushed forth into him. He had experienced this before at Mt. Wuliang. At the moment, he was able to handle the feeling of dry heat as he stored up the gush of internal energy within the 'Ocean of Energies' at his 'Shanzhong' acupoint. But after a while, he began to feel as though the 'Ocean of Energies' at his 'Shanzhong' acupoint was becoming bloated and swollen. Slowly, he began to grow afraid as well. But he thought to himself that with Zhong Ling in such a precarious situation, he had to hang on no matter what. He clenched his teeth together and did not let go.

Seeing so many strange events occur in succession, Gan Baobao was totally flustered and did not know what to do. In her heart, that spiritually transcendent feeling she had when Duan Zhengchun held her in his arms had not yet totally dissipated. Sitting on a chair stupidly, she softly cried out, "Brother Chun, Brother Chun...he addressed me as his 'Beloved Baobao', he held me, he kissed me. This time, it wasn't a dream. It was real!"

The heat in Duan Yu's chest was proving difficult to endure, but the energy which was entering his body from his hands was only growing stronger and stronger. At this point in time, roughly half of the internal energy of the people in the tunnel had entered his body. Finally, he was able to slowly drag Ye Erniang out of the tunnel, followed by the Divine Crocodile, Zhong Wanchou, Yun Zhonghe, and Zhong

Ling. Upon seeing Zhong Ling, Duan Yu felt a great sense of relief in his heart. He immediately let go of Ye Erniang, then rushed forward to help Zhong Ling up. He called out, "Sister Ling, sister Ling, you aren't hurt, are you?"

Ye Erniang and the other three had lost half of their internal energies. They released each other, then simply sat there on the floorboards, huffing and panting.

Zhong Wanchou suddenly cried out, "There's a man! There's a man in that tunnel! It's Duan Zhengchun, Duan Zhengchun!" He suddenly understood what had happened. He thought to himself, "It must have been Duan Zhengchun who dug the damn tunnel underneath my wife's bedroom. Earlier, I heard a man's voice and saw a man's shadow. It's definitely Duan Zhengchun!" The flames of his jealousy roaring, he rushed forwards, pushing Duan Yu aside and grabbing Zhong Ling by the back of her neck, intending to toss her aside, then jump back down into the tunnel and drag Duan Zhengchun out.

Upon hearing him loudly cry out the words "Duan Zhengchun!", Gan Baobao immediately awoke from her stupor. Rising to her feet, her heart was filled with grief and bitterness.

Zhong Wanchou had forgotten that he had lost a large part of his internal energy. Although he grabbed her back the back of her neck, not only was he unable to budge her, his own two feet suddenly buckled and he fell to a sitting position on the ground. But he was unwilling to give up; no matter what, he was going to pull Zhong Ling from the tunnel. There was no way he was going to let Duan Zhengchun slip away!

After pulling for a while, he saw a pair of hands emerge from the tunnel. These hands were wrapped around Zhong Ling's own wrists. Zhong Wanchou loudly cried out, "Duan Zhengchun, get up! You and I are going to fight to the death!" Exerting all his strength, he pulled Zhong Ling

backwards. And indeed, a person slowly emerged from the tunnel.

This person really was a male!

Zhong Wanchou loudly called out, "Duan Zhengchun!" Letting go of Zhong Ling, he threw himself forward and seized the man by the chest. He lifted the man up, only to see that this man was repulsive and ugly, with knitted brows, a miserable face, a crooked mouth, and slanted shoulders. His body was extremely thin and gaunt. He was totally different from Duan Zhengchun. Duan Yu cried out, "Mr. Huo, what are you doing here?" This person was the 'Golden Abacus', Cui Baiquan!

Zhong Wanchou cried out, "It isn't Duan Zhengchun!" Lifting his face towards the sky, he fell over backwards. But even then, he wouldn't relinquish his tight grip on Cui Baiquan. But suddenly, two more hands reached out from the tunnel, grabbing on to Cui Baiquan's ankles. Zhong Wanchou loudly cried, "Duan Zhengchun!" Using all his might, he pulled a second person out of the hole.

Only to see that this person was bald, with incense burn-scars on the top of his head. It was a monk. His face was filled with wrinkles, and eyebrows were long and yellow. Not only was it a monk, but it was an extremely old monk. Duan Yu cried out, "Master Huangmei! What are you doing here?" This old monk was the Yellow Browed Monk.

Zhong Wanchou exerted all the remaining strength he had to pull the Yellow Browed Monk out of the tunnel. But nobody was grabbing onto his feet. Zhong Wanchou rushed into the tunnel. After a long period of time, he breathlessly emerged from it, shouting, "Nobody left, there's nobody left in the tunnel." He glanced at Cui Baiquan, then peered at the Yellow Browed Monk. There was no way in hell either of these two could be the secret lover of his wife. He felt a huge sense of relief. He cried out, "Wife, I'm sorry, I...I wrongly blamed you yet again!" By now, he had totally exhausted all

of his internal energy, and simply lay there at the tunnel entrance, panting. He was incapable of standing up again.

The Yellow Browed Monk, Cui Baiquan, Ye Erniang, the Divine Crocodile, and Yun Zhonghe sat down on the floor, regulating their breaths and circulating their internal energy. Amongst the five, the Yellow Browed Monk's internal energy was far and away the best. After a short period of time, he stood up. He shouted loudly, "You three evil creatures! Today, I'll spare your lives. If you dare come to Dali again to cause trouble, don't blame this old monk for being merciless!"

Neither Ye Erniang, nor the Divine Crocodile, nor Yun Zhonghe had any idea as to what had happened in the tunnel. They all thought to themselves that it was some trick which the Yellow Browed Monk had performed. They thought to themselves that not even their leader had been able to overcome this old monk, who was able to take away half of their internal energy in the twinkling of an eye. How could they dare to make so much as a peep? After regulating their breathing for a long period of time, they slowly rose to their feet. They fractionally bowed towards the Yellow Browed Monk, then left the room and departed. At this moment, these three evil people didn't have the slightest evil aura about them.

After bidding Zhong Wanchou and Madame Zhong farewell, the Yellow Browed Monk, Cui Baiquan, and Duan Yu left the gorge. As they arrived at the mouth of the gorge, they saw Duan Zhengchun waiting with two of his household warriors. As Duan Zhengchun and Duan Yu, father and son, saw each other, they both felt very surprised.

As it happened, after Duan Zhengchun saw Zhong Wanchou rush into the room, he had felt extremely guilty and ashamed in his heart. He hurriedly exited the tunnel. As he left, he saw Cui Baiquan standing guard off to the side. Knowing the prince's dissolute temperament, Cui Baiquan didn't ask too many questions. He immediately volunteered

himself to enter the tunnel and keep an eye on things, so as to make sure that Madame Zhong would not be harmed by her husband. But instead, he found Zhong Ling, whose ankles had been grabbed by Yun Zhonghe. He immediately grabbed her wrists to help her out. Just as he felt as though he would no longer be able to hold on, someone seized him by his ankles. As it happened, the Yellow Browed Monk was in the middle of pondering that game of chess. Hearing some commotion down in the tunnel, he had entered the tunnel from the stone house. Following the sound of the voices, he had discerned Cui Baiquan's identity and location, and had decided to give him a hand. But in that short period of time, both he and Cui Baiquan had lost a small half of their internal energy to Duan Yu as well.

Chapter 10: Sword Qi and Lines of Jade Smoke

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

Early in the morning, Duan Zhengchun bid his wife and son farewell. Upon hearing Duan Yu say that Mu Wanqing had already slipped away with her mother the previous night, he seemed dazed for a long time. He let out a sigh, then inquired as to the status of Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi. He was informed that the two had left early in the morning, travelling northwards. Following this, he took the three ministers and four imperial guards to meet with Emperor Baoding, before departing with the monks Huizhen and Huiguan for Luliang prefecture. Duan Yu escorted him for ten li past the eastern gate before turning back.

By now, it was afternoon. Emperor Baoding was within his palace, reading and reciting Buddhist scriptures, when a eunuch named Zhanshi from Duan Zhengchun's palace entered with a message. "Reporting to your majesty. Your imperial brother's son has fallen ill to some sort of strange disease. The imperial doctor has already been dispatched to investigate." Emperor Baoding had been worried all along that Duan Yu might not have escaped from Crown Prince Yanqing's poison without injury. He immediately sent two of his own eunuch's to further investigate the situation. After an hour had passed, the two eunuch's returned with news. "Your Imperial Crown Brother's son's disease is a serious one. His mind seems to be deranged."

Emperor Baoding was inwardly alarmed. He immediately left his palace, heading towards the South Subduing Palace to personally investigate. As soon as he reached Duan Yu's bedchamber, he could hear a cacophonous series of sounds without end. Peng peng, ping pang, ka la, qiang lang. It was

as though many household utensils were being smashed. The servants outside the room immediately knelt upon seeing the Emperor. A look of panic was on their faces.

Upon entering the room, Emperor Baoding saw Duan Yu dancing in the middle of the room like a madman, tossing and throwing about all sorts of household items, including the tables and the chairs. The two imperial physicians were dodging this way and that way, a pitiable sight. Emperor Baoding cried out, "Yu'er, what's wrong?"

Duan Yu was still quite clear-headed. However, the internal energy flowing throughout his body was simply too powerful, raging as though it were preparing to burst forth from his chest. If he waved his arms about and destroyed some things, he felt slightly more comfortable. Upon seeing Emperor Baoding enter the room, he called out, "Uncle, I'm about to die!" His two hands frantically drew circles in the air as he spoke.

Dao Baifeng was standing off to one side, tears flowing. She said, "Elder brother, Yu'er was perfectly fine this morning when he saw his father off. I don't know how or why, but he's suddenly gone mad." Emperor Baoding consoled her, "Sister-in-law, it must be that the drugs he was poisoned with in the Ten Thousand Calamities Gorge have not fully been eradicated yet. It won't be too hard to cure." He said to Duan Yu, "How are you feeling?"

Repeatedly stamping his feet, Duan Yu replied, "My entire body feels swollen and is incredibly painful." Emperor Baoding saw that the skin on his face and his hands seemed unblemished and perfectly normal, without the slightest sign of swelling at all. This, clearly, was a case of Duan Yu's mind being confused. He couldn't help but furrow his forehead.

As it were, this was caused by his draining of a small half of the internal energy reserves of those five master martial artists last night. At the time, he hadn't noticed anything amiss, and after he had seen his father off, he went home

and took a small nap. In the midst of his slumber, his internal energy began to circulate improperly, and instantly began to rush about wildly. Duan Yu had immediately jumped up and began to exercise the steps of the Graceful Steps Upon the Waves. But as he moved faster and faster, the energy in his body only grew more and more agitated, growing even wilder and even less controllable. Right away, he began to shout and howl, terrifying everyone in the household.

An imperial physician opined, "Your majesty, his pulse is incredibly strong and vigorous right now. It seems as though his blood vessels have become enormously dilated. In your humble servant's opinion, a little bit of bloodletting may prove helpful. May we try it?" Thinking to himself that this idea might have some merit, Emperor Baoding nodded. "Fine. Go ahead and bleed him a little." The imperial physician replied, "Yes sir!" Opening his medicine bag, he retrieved from within a porcelain box a particularly large and fat leech. Leeches were considered to be an excellent way to bleed a patient, as it could draw away a patient's blood conveniently but not cause pain. Grabbing onto Duan Yu's forearm, the imperial physician carefully placed the leech directly on top of a blood vessel. But as soon as the leech touched Duan Yu's body, it began to writhe and squirm. No matter what the imperial physician did, it refused to bite Duan Yu. The imperial physician was startled. He forcefully pressed the leech down against Duan Yu's blood vessels. After some time passed, the leech's body grew stiff. It had actually died. The imperial physician, having humiliated himself in front of the emperor, began to sweat. He hurriedly withdrew a second leech from his medicine bag, but to no effect; it, too, ossified and died.

A worried look on his face, the other physician interjected, "Your majesty, he must have been poisoned by some sort of powerful toxin. Even the leech was poisoned to death." He had no idea that Duan Yu had swallowed the

“King of Ten Thousand Poisons”, the Cinnabar Toad. Any sort of serpent or vermin, upon smelling Duan Yu, would fearfully scurry far away. Even the most venomous of vipers would be cowed into submission, much less a mere leech.

Emperor Baoding was extremely worried. He asked, “What sort of poison is it, for it to be so incredibly lethal?” The physician replied, “In your humble servant’s opinion, your nephew’s pulse seems to be incredibly dry. He must have been poisoned by some sort of extremely hot poison. But as to exactly what that poison might be? Well...that is....forgive your humble servant’s inadequacy...” The other physician said, “I disagree. His pulse appears to have a deficiency of Yin. The toxin must be cold in nature. A hot toxin may neutralize it.” In reality, Duan Yu’s body was not only bursting with powerful, vigorous, masculine Yang internal energy from the Yellow Browed Monk, the Divine Crocodile, and Zhong Wanchou, but also with the soft Yin internal energy from Ye Erniang and Yun Zhonghe. Each of the physicians could only grasp half of the problem, and thus were unable to come up with the real answer as to why he was so ill.

Emperor Baoding listened as the two physicians debated each other incessantly. They were the finest medical minds Dali had to offer, and yet their diagnoses differed so radically. However, it was unarguable that his nephew’s illness was bizarre to the extreme. Stretching out the ‘Shi’, ‘Zhong’, and ‘Wuming’ fingers [the index finger, the middle finger, and the ring finger, respectively], he gently touched the “Lique” acupoint on Duan Yu’s wrist. The scions of the Duan family had a strange characteristic; unlike ordinary people, whose pulses flowed through the “Cunkou” point, theirs flowed through the “Lique” point. This was what physicians termed the “Reversed Juncture Pulse”.

Upon seeing Emperor Baoding demonstrate a profound knowledge of medicine with this simple movement, the two famous physicians were in awe. One of them said, “This is

written in medical books: 'A Reversed Juncture Pulse on the left hand is the sign of nobility; one on the right hand is a symbol of wealth. For both hands to have a reversed juncture is a sign of great nobility and great wealth.' His Majesty, the South Subduing Prince, and his nephew all have 'Reversed Juncture Pulses' on both hands."

The other one opined, "One needn't test their acupoints to know that these three are of great nobility and wealth." The first one replied, "That isn't the point. For his nephew to have two 'Reversed Juncture Pulses' is a sign that although this illness is certainly fearful, it will not prove to be a serious problem." The second physician disagreed. He secretly thought to himself, "What, no one who is both rich and noble can die young?" But he didn't dare say this aloud.

Emperor Baoding found that his nephew's pulse was both strong and quick. If it continued, how could his heart possibly stand the strain? He exerted the slightest bit of pressure with his finger, trying to discover any irregularities within Duan Yu's internal energy's circulatory system. Immediately, his own internal energy began to flow towards Duan Yu, disappearing without a trace. Greatly astonished, he hurriedly released Duan Yu.

He was unaware that Duan Yu had already learned the "Divine Art of the Northern Darkness" and mastered the 'Shoutaiyinfei' channels of absorption. The 'Lieque' acupoint just so happened to be part of that set of meridian channels. When he exerted his internal energy, he only filled Duan Yu's body with even more internal energy.

Duan Yu cried out, "Ow!" His entire body began to violently shake, trembling without end.

Emperor Baoding retreated two steps. He said, "Yu'er, did you somehow come across Ding Chunqiu of Xingxiuhai?" Duan Yu replied, "Ding...Ding Chunqiu? Your nephew doesn't know the person." Emperor Baoding replied, "Rumors say that he is an old man with the appearance similar to that of a Taoist divinity in paintings." Duan Yu replied, "I've never

met him before!" Emperor Baoding said, "This man is learned in heretic and evil martial arts, and is a master at dissolving and destroying the internal energy of others with some sort of skill called the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipating'. He can cause the internal energy which a martial artist has cultivated all his life to be destroyed in a day. There is nobody in the wulin world who does not utterly despise him. If...if you never met him, how could you have learned this evil skill?" Duan Yu hurriedly replied, "I have never...never learned such a skill. 'Ding Chunqiu' and the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipating'...this is the first time I've ever heard of either."

Emperor Baoding felt that Duan Yu wouldn't lie to him, much less try to dissipate his own internal energy. Suddenly, another thought hit him. "I know! It must be that Crown Prince Yanqing learned this heretic skill. Somehow, he must have found a way to implant the art within Yu'er's body, with the intention of using Yu'er to harm me and brother Chun. Hmph, this man claims to be the 'Most Evil Man in the World'. He lives up to the reputation!"

He saw Duan Yu randomly scratch and tear at his body, ripping his clothes to utter shreds. Bloody lines began to appear on Duan Yu's body. It was only with an effort that he managed to refrain from howling out, but continuous groans escaped from his lips. Dao Baifeng repeatedly tried to console him, "Yu'er, just endure it for a bit longer. Everything will be alright soon." Emperor Baoding thought to himself, "What a difficult problem...I must seek advice from the Heavenly Dragon Monastery." He said, "Yu'er, I am going to take you to pay your respects to a number of elders. I'm sure that they will have some way to cure this vile poison!" Duan Yu replied, "Yes sir!" Dao Baifeng hurriedly retrieved a new set of garments for her son to change into. Emperor Baoding escorted him out of the palace. Each mounting a chariot, they rode for Mt. Diancang.

The Heavenly Dragon Monastery was located outside of the city of Dali, being situated in the northern peaks of the Diancang mountains. Its formal name was the 'Sublime Sage Monastery' [Chongsheng Si], but the citizens had become accustomed to simply calling it the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. It was built on the shoulders of Mt. Diancang, facing the waters of a river, an utterly lovely sight. The monastery has three pagodas which were built during the Tang dynasty. The largest one was sixteen stories high, stretching over seventy meters. At the top, the following words were inscribed in metal: "Virtuously Built by Yuchi Jing, Loyal Officer of the Great Tang." Of the five treasures of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, the three pagodas were considered to be the chief.

Many of the ancestors of the Duan family who became Emperor eventually discarded their thrones and became monks here, at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. Thus, the Heavenly Dragon Monastery became the family temple for the imperial family of Dali. It was the most respected and venerated monastery in all of Dali. After each former Emperor came here, upon their birthdays, their sons and grandsons would come to the monastery to pay their respects. And each time they paid their respects, they would build a new building as a gift. The temple possessed three pavilions, seven storied buildings, nine halls, and a hundred mansions, all of them huge in size and majestic in beauty. Even the most famous Buddhist mountain temples of the central plains, such as Wutai, Putuo, Jiuhua, or Emei could not match its splendid opulence. Only, it was situated too far to the south, and thus its fame was not as great.

During the journey, Duan Yu listened to his uncle's instructions and suppressed the incessantly clashing and raging energy streams within him. As the pain subsided slightly, he arrived with his uncle in front of the monastery. Emperor Baoding was very familiar with the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, having often come here, and

immediately searched for the abbot of the monastery, Master Benyin.

In terms of familial relationship, Abbot Benyin would be considered Emperor Baoding's uncle. However, as a monk, he did not need to pay Emperor Baoding the respects due to a king, nor did Emperor Baoding need to treat him as he might ordinarily treat a family elder. The two met with each other on equal terms. Emperor Baoding explained how Duan Yu was kidnapped by Crown Prince Yanqing, how he had been poisoned with a vile venom, and how he had been afflicted with an evil skill that caused him to dissolve the internal energy of others.

Abbot Benyin mumbled to himself for a short period of time, then said, "Please accompany me to Muni [as in Sakyamuni] Pavilion and meet with my three apprentice-brothers." Emperor Baoding said, "I have disturbed the tranquil meditations of so many master monks. My sin is grievous indeed!" Abbot Benyin replied, "The son of the South Subduing Prince shall one day be the heir to the throne of Dali, which will be a true blessing to the people of the country. Your experience and internal energy can only be above that of my own. For you to come and ask me for help can only mean that this is a difficult problem indeed. I cannot help you by myself, and must consult with my apprentice-brothers."

Two young apprentice monks led the way, with Abbot Benyin directly behind him and Emperor Baoding with his nephew in the rearmost position. They took a left at the Auspicious Crane Gate, passed by the Billowing Heaven Gate, the Jade Pavilion of the Pure Capital, the Boundless Hall, the Three Principals Temple, the Great Tushita [a heavenly realm] Courtyard, the Rain and Flowers Courtyard, and the Prana Terrace. Finally, they arrived at a long corridor. The two apprentice monks respectfully stood outside the doorway, halting their steps. Following the corridor, the three headed westwards, arriving at a number of rooms.

Although Duan Yu had often come to the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, he had never come here before. Those rooms were all built out of pinewood. The wooden pillars were simple and unadorned and in perfect shape. They looked totally different from the splendid and majestic buildings which the three had passed on their way here.

Abbot Benyin clapped his hands together a few times, then said, "Amitabha! Benyin has come across a difficult problem which I cannot solve. Forgive me for interrupting your studies, my apprentice-brothers." From within a room, someone spoke, "Please enter, abbot!" Slowly, Benyin stretched out his hand and pushed the door open. The door creaked and squeaked as it opened; clearly, it was opened or closed only very rarely. Duan Yu followed Abbot Benyin as the latter walked inside. Earlier, he had heard Benyin say he would consult with 'three apprentice-brothers', but there were four monks inside, seated on cattail hassocks. Of the three monks that could be seen, two of them had withered appearances, with the third one possessed of a large frame. The fourth monk was situated towards the east, and was facing the wall, still and unmoving.

Emperor Baoding recognized the two withered, skinny monks; one was named Benguan, the other was named Benxiang. They were Abbot Benyin's elder apprentice-brothers. The large, stalwart monk was named Bencan; he was Benyin's younger apprentice-brother. He only knew that Muni Pavilion housed three elder monks with the names 'Guan,' 'Xiang', and 'Can'; but did not recognize the fourth monk. He immediately bowed low and paid his respects. A slight smile on their lips, Benguan and the other two returned his salute. Perhaps the monk facing the wall was rooted to the floor, or his studies had reached a critical juncture and rendered him unable to turn his attention away; regardless, he did not pay the slightest attention to Emperor Baoding. Emperor Baoding knew that the two characters, 'Mu' and 'Ni', referred to stillness and quiet. In

the Muni Pavilion, the fewer words that he spoke, the better. Thus he was succinct and terse in describing the evil poison flowing in Duan Yu's body. He finished by saying, "I earnestly hope that you four can benevolently give me some pointers."

Benguan mumbled to himself for some time while measuring up Duan Yu. He said, "Apprentice brothers, what do you think?" Bencan replied, "Even though it would cost some energy, it might not render us incapable of mastering the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'."

Upon hearing the four words, "Liu Mai Shen Jian" [Six Meridians Divine Sword]", Emperor Baoding felt a shock in his heart. He thought to himself, "In my youth, my father once told me that the Duan family's ancestral homeland had an infinitely powerful skill known as the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians.' But according to my father, this was just a legend, and no one in our family history was recorded as actually having mastered this technique. Moreover, no one actually knows if this technique is really as powerful as the legends say. From the words of Master Benguan, it seems as though such a wondrous skill actually exists!"

His thoughts turned in another direction. "Judging from his words, they intend to drive away the poison from Duan Yu's body by using their own internal energy, but doing so would tire them out and obstruct their attempts at mastering the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. But Yu'er has been poisoned with an evil toxin and an evil skill has been implanted in his body; both are deadly and strange to the extreme. If the five of us do not combine our strengths, how can he be cured?" Although he felt extremely apologetic, in the end, he did not decline the suggestion. Benxiang did not say a single word. He rose to his feet, lowered his head, furrowed his eyebrows, then took a slanted position at the northeast side of the room. Benguan and Bencan each returned to their respective positions as well. Abbot Benyin said, "Shanzai, Shanzai!" [Shanzai is a

Buddhist exclamation, usually signifying a good deed being done]. He took a position towards the west-southwest.

Emperor Baoding said, “Yu’er, these four elders of yours have decided to use their own internal energy to drive out the poison in your veins, not caring about the loss of their own strength. Quickly kowtow and thank them!” From the expression on his uncle’s face as well as that of the four monks, Duan Yu knew that this was no small matter indeed. He immediately fell to his knees and kowtowed to each of the monks in turn. Each of them smiled faintly and nodded in response. Emperor Baoding said, “Yu’er, rest on your knees. Don’t think about anything at all, and definitely don’t exert so much as an ounce of your internal energy. If you feel some strange sensations, don’t be alarmed; this is normal.” Duan Yu acknowledged the instructions, then sat down as instructed.

Benguan held up his right thumb and, exercising a precise amount of force, pressed it against the “Fengfu” acupoint behind Duan Yu’s skull. The force of his Solitary Solar Finger gradually emerged. The “Fengfu” acupoint was roughly an inch beneath the hairline, and belonged to the “Du” meridians. Next, Benxiang struck the “Zigong” acupoint of Duan Yu’s “Ren” meridians. Bencan struck the “Daheng” acupoint of his “Yinwei” meridians. Abbot Benyin struck his “Youmen” acupoint of his “Chong” meridians. Finally, Emperor Baoding struck his “Qingming” acupoint of his “Yinjiao” meridians. A human body has seven channels and eight meridians; of the eight meridians, the five of them ignored the “Yangwei” and the “Yangjiao” meridians. All five of them exercised the Solitary Solar Finger, attempting to purify his body of any toxins or evil energies with their pure Yang energy, driving them out through the acupoints of his “Yangwei” and “Yangjiao” meridians.

These five masters of the Solitary Solar Finger had each achieved a very close level of attainment within it. With a ‘chi-chi’ sound, five streams of pure Yang energy entered

Duan Yu's body at the same time. Duan Yu's body suddenly trembled and was filled with an incredibly warm sensation that was indescribably comfortable, as though he were soaking in the sunlight during winter. The five people's fingers moved in unison. They felt as though after their energies entered Duan Yu's body, they would gradually vanish, never to reappear. Duan Yu had not fully mastered all of the aspects of the "Divine Art of the Northern Darkness", but with the five masters pouring the pure Yang energy of their Solitary Solar Finger into his body, he was helpless to resist, and the energy began to collect in his 'sea of energy' at his "Shanzhong" acupoint. The five elite experts of the Duan family gazed at each other, startlement and bewilderment covering each and every one of their faces.

Suddenly, a powerful cry was heard. "WUHUA!" Everyone's ears shook with the sound, a buzzing noise filling them. Emperor Baoding knew that this was an extremely high-level Buddhist technique known as the "Lion's Roar" [Shizi Hou]. Within the roar was hidden an extremely deep internal force, easily capable of terrifying opponents or astonishing friends. The monk who was facing the wall spoke. "A powerful opponent is arriving in but a few days, and the centuries-old fame of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery is dangling above a precipice. As for this mewling babe, regardless of whether he has been poisoned or afflicted with some evil skill; is it really worth it to waste internal energy over him at this critical juncture?" These sentences were filled with an awe-inspiring dignity and majesty.

Abbot Benyin said, "Martial-uncle, your instructions are wise!" With a wave of his left hand, the five people retreated at the same time.

Upon hearing Abbot Benyin address that man as 'martial-uncle', Emperor Baoding hurriedly said, "I was unaware that Elder Kurong was present, and am guilty of being remiss in

paying my proper respects.” As it were, Elder Kurong was of the highest ranking generation in the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. He had secluded himself into isolated meditation for decades now, and none of the monks of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery had ever seen his actual face. Emperor Baoding, as well, had only heard of him but had never met him before. In the past, he had heard that Elder Kurong was in secluded meditation at the Two Trees Courtyard, but no one had mentioned him in over ten years. He had assumed that Elder Kurong had achieved nirvana [i.e. died].

Elder Kurong continued, “One must consider a matter’s relative importance and urgency. The date of our appointment with the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, from the Great Snowy Mountain, is almost upon us. Zhengming, why don’t you join us in discussing the matter.” Emperor Baoding replied, “Yes!” In his heart, he thought to himself, “The Great Snowy Mountain’s Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel possesses a deep and erudite understanding of the dharma. I wonder what is the connection he has with us?”

From within his bosom, Abbot Benyin withdrew a resplendent golden letter, passing it over to Emperor Baoding. Emperor Baoding accepted the letter. It weighed heavily in his hand. This letter was exceptionally bizarre; its ‘envelope’ was actually an extremely thin layer gold beaten into the shape of an envelope, with the words written in Sanskrit using platinum [‘white gold’]. Emperor Baoding could read it. The words were, “Respectfully Presented to the Sublime Sage Monastery”.

He withdrew the actual letter from the envelope; it, too, was made out of an exceptionally thin sheet of beaten gold. Once again, the words were written in Sanskrit. The general meaning was, “Many years ago, I had a chance meeting with the honorable Murong Bo. In the course of our meeting, we conversed at length about the various martial arts in the world. Mr. Murong held your temple’s “Divine Sword of the

Six Meridians” in the highest esteem, and deeply regretted not having the opportunity to visit you to see it himself. I recently have heard that Mr. Murong passed away; my sorrow is boundless. I respectfully request that your revered monastery transmit to me the manuscript of the “Divine Sword of the Six Meridians”, so that I might burn it in sacrifice before Mr. Murong’s tomb. I will arrive in a number of days; I hope that my wish might be granted.”

The letter was signed, “Jiumozhi, disciple of the Great Wheel Temple of the Great Snowy Mountain, pays his deepest respects.” The words on the letter were also written using platinum; the carefulness and workmanship displayed was nothing short of exquisite. Clearly, it had been crafted by a master artisan who had expended boundless efforts in making it. The letter and envelope alone could be considered an overwhelmingly priceless treasure, displaying the obvious wealth and opulence of the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel.

Emperor Baoding had heard before that Jiumozhi, the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, was the national protector and dharma king [an extremely high rank in Tibetan Buddhism; the Golden Wheel Monk of ROCH was originally also titled ‘dharma king’] of the nation of Tibet. He had heard that the man possessed a staggering intellect and a clear understanding of Buddhism. Every five years, he would hold lectures where he would expound at length on various scriptures. Many high monks and men of great virtue of the western regions would converge at the Great Wheel Monastery of the Great Snowy Mountain to ask for clarifications regarding difficult-to-understand parts of various scriptures. After the discussions were complete and the people began to depart, there would not be a single person who was not joyful and full of praise. Emperor Baoding himself had once desired to travel there to listen to the readings of the scriptures. This letter described him as having discussed martial arts with Gusu’s Murong Bo, and

even becoming intimate friends with him; clearly, then, the man was also an extremely skilled martial artist. For such a man of great intelligence and wisdom, it would be perfectly normal for him not to practice martial arts. If he really were to be a martial artist as well, then he must be a formidable character indeed.

Abbot Benyin said, "The 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' is a precious treasure of our monastery, passed down from generation to generation. It represents the highest level of martial arts learning which the Duan family of Dali possesses. Zhengming, Dali's Duan family's most advanced martial arts technique resides here, in the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. You are not a monk, but a secular man; therefore, even though you are our nephew and possess a deep understanding of many abstruse martial arts concepts, we could not divulge it to you." Emperor Baoding said, "Yes, I understand this rule." Benguan said, "Not even Zhengming and Zhengchun knew that our monastery possessed the manuscript for learning the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. I wonder how it is that Gusu's Murong family learned of it."

Duan Yu, listening, suddenly thought of the 'Blessed Reading Ground' within the cave near Mt. Wuliang, and its empty shelves. One of the shelves had been marked "the Duan family of Dali", with two additional markings on it: "Solitary Solar Finger, missing" and "Divine Sword of the Six Meridians, missing." He thought to himself, "My Dear Goddess scoured the land for the martial arts manuscripts of every family and school in the world, but was never able to acquire my family's "Solitary Solar Finger" and "Divine Sword of the Six Meridians." He felt delight in his heart, but also some melancholy as he imagined how much the Dear Goddess must have regretted their absence.

He heard Benguan angrily say, "The Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel can be considered a world-famous monk of high standing. He must have lost his wits! How can he

demand this manuscript from our monastery? Zhengming, as our brother abbot knows, 'If he comes, he comes not with good intentions, but with ill will.' This matter is of the utmost importance, and we ourselves dare not handle it by ourselves. Thus, we invited martial-uncle Kurong to lead us in handling the situation."

Benyin said, "Although our monastery does indeed have this manuscript, I am ashamed to admit that none of us are capable of learning the divine skill written upon it. We can't even be said to have a rudimentary knowledge of it. Martial-uncle Kurong has been practicing that which is known as 'withered ['Ku', like his name] meditation'. This is a totally different type of divine skill which our monastery possesses. He, too, is lacking in understanding in the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. But although we are incapable of learning this skill, no one in the world knows about it. Can it be that the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel is totally confident in himself and is not afraid of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' at all?

Kurong icily said, "I doubt that he dares to look down upon the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. The respect which he holds for Murong Bo, and the respect which Murong Bo held for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', hmph...I am sure the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel himself knows which one he holds in greater import. But most likely, he has guessed that, as our monastery has not produced any exceptionally astonishing martial artists, though the manuscript may be priceless, no one can master its skills, and thus he is not worried."

Benguan loudly shouted, "If he himself admires the skill and asked for a chance to borrow it and read it, on account of us respecting him as an eminent Buddhist monk, at most we would gently and tactfully refuse. There's no big deal. What really pisses me off is that he's going to go burn it in front of some dead guy. He's really thinking too little of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery!"

Benxiang let out a sigh. "Martial brother, there is no need for you to work yourself into such a rage. I do not think that the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel is such an ignorant and presumptuous man. It seems he wishes to imitate the story of 'Wu Jizha hanging a sword on the tomb'. It appears he held Mr. Murong in the utmost of esteem. Alas, an excellent friend passes away, and can never be seen again..." And he slowly began to shake his head. Emperor Baoding said, "Master Benxiang, what was the character of Mr. Murong Bo?" Benxiang said, "I do not know. But for such an extraordinary character as the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel to hold him in such esteem, he must have been an incredible person indeed." And as he spoke, he seemed to be carried away and carefree.

[Here is a quick summary of the story of Wu Jizha: Wu Jizha was a man of the Zhou dynasty who had a good friend named Xu Jun. Jizha had a precious sword created for him that he needed for a special mission; his friend Xu Jun saw the sword and wanted it very much for himself, but said nothing, as it would be inappropriate. Wu Jizha saw that his friend wanted it and intended to gift him the sword, but could not do so immediately, as he needed it for the mission. He vowed to himself that he would give Xu Jun the sword when he returned, but by the time he completed the mission, Xu Jun was dead. Beside himself with grief, Wu Jizha went to Xu Jun's tomb and hung his sword over a tree overlooking the tomb. When people asked him what was the point of him doing so, he replied, 'Although Xu Jun has departed, the promise I made him in my heart still binds me. I promised myself that when I returned, I would make a gift of the sword to him; how could I allow such a paltry thing as death stand in the way of me keeping my oath?']

Abbot Benyin continued, "Martial-uncle Kurong believes that, based upon his judgment of our enemy's capabilities, unless we are able to quickly master the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', the precious manuscript will be forcibly

taken from us, and the Heavenly Dragon Monastery will suffer a crushing blow. Unfortunately, the divine technique written on the scroll is heavily dependent upon one's internal energy reserve, and so there's no way to simply hasten one's learning of it. Zhengming, it's not that we don't care about Duan Yu or his condition. Only, we fear that if we exhaust too much internal energy and our powerful enemy suddenly arrives, we won't be able to fend him off. It seems that although Duan Yu's problem is very severe, he won't be at risk of losing his life for many days yet. Let's have him quietly rest here for the next few days. If his condition suddenly takes a dangerous turn for the worse, we will immediately come up with a solution to cure him. After we have driven off our enemy, we will exert all of our energies into curing him and driving out the poison in his body. What do you think?"

Although Emperor Baoding was worried about Duan Yu, he also was capable of understanding the big picture. He knew that the Heavenly Dragon Monastery was a fundamental root and supporting structure of Dali's Duan family. Whenever the imperial family was in trouble, the Heavenly Dragon Monastery would lend its support, and each time they would pull through. In the past, when the treacherous official Yang Yizhen murdered Emperor Shangde and stole the throne, it was the Heavenly Dragon Monastery who, along with loyal official Gao Zhisheng, put down the rebellion and restored peace. Dali was established in the second year of Heavenly Fortune, of the Later Jin dynasty of the Five Dynasties period; it had existed for a hundred and fifty eight years now. It had undergone many trials and tribulations. One of the major reasons why the state had been able to survive them all was the calming and steadying influence of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. Today, the Heavenly Dragon Monastery was in trouble; this was identical to the state itself being in danger. He immediately said, "Abbot, your benevolence is greatly appreciated, and

my gratitude towards you is boundless. But if I might ask, how do you intend to defend against the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, and how can I, Zhengming, offer my humble assistance?"

Benyin mumbled to himself, "You are a master amongst the secular members of the Duan family. If you can work together with us to defeat this powerful opponent, it will add to our prestige. But for you, a secular person, to get involved in a dispute between Buddhist disciples...no doubt, the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel will laugh at us, mocking the Heavenly Dragon Monastery for not being able to take care of ourselves."

Kurong suddenly said, "If each of us were to try to individually learn the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', it would be impossible. Simply put, our internal energy is not strong enough. I had once thought of a workaround, where six of us each master a single one of the six meridians, and all six of us strike in unison. Although there is no glory in us fighting him six against one, in the end, we aren't challenging him to a duel, but trying to protect our monastery and our scriptures. Even if a hundred of us were to fight him at the same time, it would be acceptable. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of a sixth person in the Heavenly Dragon Monastery who was skilled enough to join us. I have worried about this conundrum for a long time. Zhengming, why don't you take the sixth position? Only, you'll have to shave your head and switch into monastery robes." He spoke more and more quickly, as though he were getting very excited; however, his tone of voice was as icy and cold as ever.

Emperor Baoding said, "I have always desired to fully devote myself to the Buddha and his teachings. Only, with regards to the secret manuscript, well, I've never seen it before. For me to try and learn it so hastily, I'm afraid that..."

Bencan said, "You long ago learned the fundamentals to this skill. You only need to learn the sword techniques."

Emperor Baoding did not understand. He said, "Abbot, please explain." Abbot Benyin said, "Be seated." Emperor Baoding knelt down on one of the cattail hassocks.

Benyin said, "The 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' is not an actual, physical sword. It is the transformation of the energy of the Solitary Solar Finger into sword qi. It has substance, but is invisible; it can be described as 'invisible sword qi'. The 'Six Meridians' refer to the six meridians near the hand from which the energy is executed; the "Taiyinfei" channels [Lunar Lung], the "Jueyinxinbao" channels [Yin Pericardium], the "Shaoyinxin" channels [Lesser Yin Heart], the "Taiyangxiaochang" channels [Solar Intestine], the "Yangmingwei" channels [Brilliant Yang Stomach], and the "Shaoyangsanjiao" channels [Three Lesser Yang Cavities]. And as he spoke, he withdrew a rolled up scroll from behind Benguan's hassock.

Bencan took the scroll over, unfurling it and hanging it up on the wall. The passage of many years had turned the paper a sickly yellowish-brown color. A picture of a naked male was on the paper, with all of his acupoints clearly marked out. Red and black lines were used to indicate how the internal energy was supposed to flow amongst the six meridians. Emperor Baoding was a superb expert of the Solitary Solar Finger; at a single glance, he could tell that the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' was indeed based upon the Solitary Solar Finger as its foundation.

Duan Yu was lying on the floor, resting. Upon seeing the naked male picture on the scroll, his thoughts instantly turned to the scroll which he accidentally tore up. He thought to himself, "The acupoints of men and women are identical. Dear Goddess was so strange. Why did she draw a scroll of a naked woman instead of a man, much less use give that naked woman her own features?" He faintly felt that it was inappropriate, as though his Dear Goddess had intended to use her beauty and features to lure men into

staring at the scroll and seduce them into learning its martial arts. In his delirium, he had accidentally torn up the scroll; perhaps this was actually to his benefit and had aided him in avoiding some sort of catastrophe. But thinking in such a way would profane the Dear Goddess' purity, and so the thought only flashed by his mind, and he dared not ponder on it longer.

Benyin said, "Zhengming, you are the absolute ruler of the country of Dali. For you to change into a monk's attire is a critical stopgap measure, but if our enemy realizes who you actually are, a huge blow will be dealt to the prestige of Dali. I leave it to you to decide whether or not the advantages outweigh the disadvantages." Emperor Baoding folded his hands together. "Guard the dharma, protect the monastery. Honor and duty leave no other options." Benyin replied, "Excellent. However, the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' may not be passed down to secular disciples. You must enter the monastery gates and become an actual monk; after our opponent has been driven off, I will permit you to return to the secular world and unfrock you." Emperor Baoding rose to his feet, then knelt down on both knees. "Great master, please be benevolent [and accept me as a disciple]."

Elder Kurong said, "Come over here. I will shave you."

Emperor Baoding moved forward until he was kneeling before Elder Kurong. Seeing his uncle prepare to be shaven and join the ranks of the monks, Duan Yu was secretly shocked. He watched as Elder Kurong stretched his hand out and pressed his palm against the top of Emperor Baoding's head. There was not so much as a single shred of muscle on his hand; the only thing which lay underneath his skin was bone. Elder Kurong still did not turn around, as he recited, "Within this dust-speck of a world, there are three concealed truths. All accomplishments are predetermined by karma. These accomplishments are meaningless and do not even add to the dust. And yet, it is difficult to stop thinking of the

present. [This translation is probably totally off; can someone who understands Buddhism help retranslate this?].” He lifted his hand up. All of Emperor Baoding’s black hair fell off, leaving his head totally bald, without so much as a single strand of hair on top. Even if a razor had been used, such a clean shave would not have been possible. Duan Yu was totally shocked, and Emperor Baoding, Benguan, Benyin, and the others were also extremely impressed. “Elder Kurong has long practiced the art of ‘Withered Meditation’. He has reached such an incredibly high level of strength!”

Elder Kurong said, “Upon entering Buddha’s doorway, you shall now be known as Benchen [Chen means dust, like what he was talking about earlier].” Emperor Baoding joined his palms together. “Master, thank you for granting me a name.” Buddhists do not adhere to secular rules regarding generational gaps. Originally, Abbot Benyin was Emperor Baoding’s uncle, but now that Emperor Baoding had been shaved by Elder Kurong himself and brought into the monastery, he became Benyin’s younger apprentice-brother, on the same generational level. Emperor Baoding immediately changed into monastic shoes and clothes, his appearance completely changing into that of a learned and eminent monk.

Elder Kurong said, “That ‘Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel’ might arrive this very night. Benyin, transmit the secrets of the ‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’ to Benchen.” Benyin replied, “Yes!” Pointing to the manuscript, he said, “Brother Benchen, you shall focus on the ‘Shoushaoyangsanjiao’ meridians. After your qi is collected at the dantian, circulate it upwards, through your shoulders and arms. Once it reaches the ‘Qinglengyuan’ point [Chilly Pool], curve the qi to pass through the ‘Tianjing’ point [Heavenly Well], then the ‘Sidu’ [Four Recitations] point, the ‘Sanyang’ path [Three Yang], then the Huizong [Ancestral Assembly], Waiguan [Outer Gate], Yangchi [Yang Moat],

Zhongzhu [Central Islet], and Yemen [Liquid Door] points. Condense the internal energy, then fire it out from the 'Guanchong' acupoint [Vigorous Gate] of your ring finger."

Emperor Baoding followed the instructions and circulated his internal energy as ordered. With a 'chi-chi' sound, his internal energy burst out from the 'Guanchong' acupoint of his ring finger.

Elder Kurong happily said, "Your cultivation of internal energy is extraordinary indeed. Although the sword techniques themselves have many heavy and complicated changes, your sword qi has already taken form. You can now execute it at will."

Benyin said, "Originally, the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' was supposed to be executed by a single person. But in this day and age, martial arts has declined, and there is now no one capable of gathering and cultivating such a powerful, vigorous internal energy. All we can do is divide up the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' amongst ourselves. My martial-uncle has specialized in the 'Shaoshang' sword of the thumb; I specialize in the 'Shangyang' sword of the index finger; brother Benguan specializes in the 'Zhongchong' sword of the middle finger; brother Benchen specializes in the 'Guanchong' sword of the ring finger, brother Benxiang specializes in the 'Shaochong' sword of the pinky finger, and brother Bencan specializes in the 'Shaoze' sword of the left pinky. We must attend to the matter of combining these six swords at once."

He once more retrieved the manuscripts of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', hanging them on the four walls of the room. The picture describing the 'Shaoshang' sword he hung next to Elder Kurong. Every single picture was filled with criss-crossing lines, circles, and arcs. Each of the six focused on their respective manuscripts, and began poking and pointing in the air as they sketched out the movements.

Duan Yu slowly sat up. He felt as though the energy in his body was swaying, and even more difficult to bear than

before. As it happened, just a short time ago, Emperor Baoding and the other four monks had poured a substantial amount of internal energy into his body. Seeing how his uncle and the other elders were concentrating so hard on their practice, he didn't dare to make a sound and disturb them. Sitting down for a long while, he began to feel bored. By accident, his gaze came to rest upon the manuscript which was resting above Elder Kurong. After staring at it for only a short while, he began to feel his right arm begin to tremble uncontrollably, as though something was trying to burst forth from his skin and escape. That small, mouselike creature that was trying to escape precisely from the 'Kongzui' acupoint, as illustrated on the manuscript.

He had successfully completed the practice of the 'Shoutaiyinfei' channels. The acupoints illustrated on that manuscript were identical with those on the illustration of the naked girl. However, the lines that were drawn were totally different. According to the pathways drawn by the red lines, the energy from the 'Zikongzui' point passed to the 'Dayuan' point, then immediately jumped to the 'Chize' point, then dropped down to the 'Yuji' point. Unexpectedly, as he tried to channel the wildly rushing internal energy as according to the manuscript, it actually obeyed, although it took many twists and turns as it moved towards his upper arm. As the internal energy flowed through his meridians, he felt the nausea and pain of his body immediately lessen. Immediately, he dedicated his mind to channeling the energy into his 'Shanzhong' acupoint.

However, this gush of energy was different, and could not be easily channeled towards his 'Shanzhong' acupoint as instructed by the naked female pictures. After a short period of time, he began to cry out, "Ow, ow!" in pain. Hearing his cries, Emperor Baoding immediately turned his head. "How are you feeling?" Duan Yu replied, "In my body, there are innumerable flows of qi that are running amuck. It is extremely painful. I was thinking about grandmaster

Kurong's manuscript, and the energy began to flow towards my 'Shanzhong' acupoint. Ow! But my 'Shanzhong' acupoint has been totally filled to the brim, and can't take in any more energy! My...my...my chest is about to explode!"

This feeling which he had, only he himself could tell, due to it being caused by the internal circulation of qi. Thus, even though he proclaimed that his chest was about to explode, to outsiders, his chest seemed perfectly normal. Emperor Baoding was an expert martial artist, and knew that for a person to experience the feeling of his 'Shanzhong' acupoint being filled to the brim with energy would require at least twenty years of practice that resulted in an internal energy of unmatched power and vigor. As Duan Yu had never practiced martial arts, this sensation must have been caused by the evil toxins in his body. Emperor Baoding was inwardly fearful, knowing that unless the internal energy was dispersed, Duan Yu's entire body would become paralyzed. But if the toxins were dispersed with the qi and settled deep within his body, it would become almost impossible to eradicate in the future.

Normally, when settling grave and important affairs, he would be both impartial and swift in passing judgment, uttering only a single sentence in verdict. But the matter in front of him would affect the entirety of Duan Yu's life. If only a slight mistake were made, his life would be immediately at risk. Seeing that Duan Yu's eyes had a dazed look, giving him the appearance of madness, he realized that he had no time to be irresolute. He decided to himself, "At this point in time, even if we have to have Duan Yu 'drink poison to quench his thirst', there are no other options." He said, "Yu'er, I will teach you how to disperse your internal energy." Immediately, he began to demonstrate while speaking and taught him the method to do so.

Not waiting for Emperor Baoding to finish speaking, Duan Yu immediately began to follow his instructions step by step. The martial arts techniques of Dali's Duan family were

incomparably marvelous. He followed the instructions precisely, and the wildly rushing internal energy in his body began to disperse, settling down into his internal organs. According to traditional Chinese medicine, a person's organs were divided into the "Five Internal Organs and the Six Hollow Organs." "Internal Organs" referred to 'storage', and "Hollow Organs" referred to 'home'. The original term had the secondary meaning of storing and accumulating energy. Duan Yu first drained all of the internal energy of seven disciples of Mt. Wuliang's Sword sect, then absorbed some of the energy of masters such as Duan Yanqing, the Yellow Browed Monk, Ye Erniang, the Divine Crocodile, Yun Zhonghe, Zhong Wanchou, and Cui Baiquan. This day, he gained a small portion of the internal energy of Emperor Baoding, Benguan, Benxiang, Benyin, and Bencan, five master martial artists of the Duan family. His internal energy was now incomparably deep and profound; the phrase, 'Shocking the ancients and overawing contemporaries' could be used to describe it. He had no equal in the entire world. Now, under his uncle's instructions, he began to store away this powerful internal energy within his organs, and his entire body began to feel more and more comfortable. His entire body felt light and carefree, as though he was about to fly away into the sky.

Upon seeing the boundless joy and pleasure on Duan Yu's face, Emperor Baoding feared that he had deeply fire deviated, and that the toxin in his body would forevermore give him trouble. No matter how hard they tried to remove it, most likely it would exhaust and tire him for the rest of his life. He couldn't help but inwardly sigh.

Aftering hearing Emperor Baoding finish teaching Duan Yu how to disperse his internal energy, Elder Kurong said, "Benchen, as a man sows, so shall he reap. This is true for everything in the world. Good fortune or trouble, calamity or blessing, all arise from the heart. There's no need for you to worry too much about others. Hurry up and start focusing on

mastering the 'Shaoshang' sword!" Emperor Baoding said, "Yes!" Putting away his feelings, he once more began to intensively study the 'Shaoshang' sword techniques.

The internal energy in Duan Yu's body was extremely abundant. There was far too much of it for it to be totally stored within a short period of time. But the more he practiced the dispersion technique, the more familiar he became with it, and the more familiar he became with it, the more quickly the dispersal proceeded. The seven of them each concentrated on their own designated martial arts, and none of them noticed as light gradually appeared from the east.

By the time he heard the roosters announce the arrival of dawn, Duan Yu felt as though his limbs and his bones no longer contained the slightest bit of internal energy. He rose to his feet and stretched a bit. He saw that his uncle and the five elder monks were still totally, unmovingly dedicated to practicing the sword techniques. He didn't dare to open the door to go out and take a walk, much less make a noise and disturb them. In his boredom, he casually started to check out the manuscript which his uncle was focusing on, as well as the 'Shaoshang' sword manuscript again. Although he had heard that the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' could not be transmitted to secular disciples, he felt that he could not possibly understand such a high level martial arts, and so there should be no problem with him just glancing at it. As he was focusing on the manuscript, suddenly he felt a burst of internal energy pour forth from his dantian on its own accord, gushing towards his arms and pouring forth from the ring finger's 'Guanchong' acupoint. But he didn't know how to actually release the energy from his finger, and consequently felt as though the tip of his ring finger was becoming more and more swollen. He thought to himself, "I better let this burst of energy dissipate." Just as he thought this, that gush of energy really did return to his dantian.

Duan Yu didn't know that he had accidentally learned a secret high level technique; all he felt was that the internal energy in his arm flowed up and down as according to his hearts desire. He felt that it was very funny. Out of the three monks of the Muni Pavilion, he felt that master Benxiang was the nicest and most amiable. Turning his head, he stared at Benxiang's "Shoushaoyinxin Channels" manuscript. The energy from this manuscript was generated from the 'Jiquan' [Utmost Spring] acupoint of the armpit, then flowed three inches upwards into the 'Qingling' [Green Spirit] acupoint, where it condensed as it passed through the 'Shaohai' [Young Ocean] acupoint, the 'Jingling' [Spirit Channel] acupoint, 'Tongli' [Open Within] acupoint, 'Shenmen' [Divine Door] acupoint, and the 'Shaofuzhu' [Lesser Residence] acupoint, before exiting via the pinky finger's "Shaochong" acupoint. As he pondered the manuscript, a gush of energy really did pass through the channels as instructed by the drawing. Only, the speed of that gush of energy could not be controlled; sometimes it was extremely quick, but at other moments, it came to a complete halt. He guessed that it was probably due to him not being very good, and did not overthink it.

In the course of half a day, Duan Yu had already circulated his internal energy through every single passageway as drawn by the paintings. He felt as energetic and vigorous. Without anything to do, he once more began to study the 'Shaoshang', 'Shangyang', 'Zhongchong', 'Guanchong', 'Shaochong', and 'Shaoze' sword pictures. He saw that the red lines and black lines intercrossed in numerous and complicated ways. He thought to himself, "How could anyone memorize such annoyingly complex sword techniques? Besides, martial grand-uncle has already stated that non-monks are not allowed to learn it." He immediately stopped looking at them. He felt a bit hungry, and thought to himself, "Why haven't the apprentice monks brought any vegetarian dishes and rice yet? I might as well

secretly creep outside and look for some food.” But at that very moment, he suddenly detected a gentle, fragrant scent of white sandalwood, and heard from the sound of a Buddhist chant waft in from afar.

Elder Kurong said, “Shanzai, shanzai! The Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel has graced us with his presence. How well have you learned your respective skills?” Bencan replied, “Although I still have not mastered it, I believe I know enough to fight our enemy.” Kurong said, “Excellent! Benyin, I don’t want to walk. Invite the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel to come to the Muni Pavilion to hold discourse with us.” Abbot Benyin said, “Yes!” He left. Benguan retrieved five cassocks, arranging them in a row on the east side. On the west side, he put a single cassock. He sat down on the first cassock, Benxiang sat down on the second, Bencan the fourth, and Emperor Baoding the fifth, leaving the central cassock for Abbot Benyin. Duan Yu had no place to sit, and so stood behind Emperor Baoding. Kurong, Benguan, and the others reviewed the techniques on the manuscripts one last time before finally gathering them up and placing them in front of Elder Kurong.

Emperor Baoding said, “Yu’er, very shortly a fierce battle will erupt here. Sword qi will be freely flying across the room, and things will become very dangerous. Your uncle won’t be able to divert any attention to protecting you. Why don’t you go outside and take a walk?” A burst of misery suddenly filled Duan Yu’s heart. “From everyone’s tone of voice, it seems as though this ‘Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel’s’ martial arts is at an extraordinarily high level. My uncle only just learned the ‘Shaochong’ sword; I don’t know if he’ll be able to win or not. If some sort of mistake or error occurs, what sort of unthinkable thing might happen?” He replied, “Uncle, I...I want to stay with you. My heart is ill at ease, imagining you sword-fighting with others.” By the time he finished the last few words, his voice was already choked

with sobs. Emperor Baoding's heart was moved as well. "This child really has a filial heart."

Elder Kurong said, "Yu'er, come sit by my side. No matter how powerful the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel is, I guarantee that he won't be able to harm a single hair on your head." Although his tone of voice was as calm and icy as ever, his words conveyed an extremely proud and lofty confidence.

Duan Yu replied, "Yes!" He walked in front of Elder Kurong, but did not dare stare at his face. He, too, knelt and stared at the wall. Elder Kurong's body frame was much larger than that of Duan Yu, totally covering Duan Yu's smaller body. Emperor Baoding was both moved and relieved. Previously, Elder Kurong had demonstrated the 'Art of the Withered Meditation' in shaving his head, displaying a power that more than allowed for him to show disdain for the heroes of this age. It would be more than enough to protect Duan Yu.

In a very short amount of time, all sound disappeared from the Muni Pavilion.

After a long period of time, Abbot Benyin's voice could be heard. "Enlightened Lord, you grace us with your dharmic knowledge. The Muni Pavilion is this way." Duan Yu heard another voice answered him. "Abbot, thank you for going to the trouble of guiding me." The second voice was extremely gentle and mild, refined and courteous. It definitely did not belong to a vicious, violent tyrant who took what he wanted. From the sounds of the footsteps, around ten people were headed their way. He heard Benyin push open the wooden door while saying, "Enlightened Lord, please enter!"

The Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel replied, "Excuse me!" He entered the room, then immediately folded his hands in a gesture of respect towards Elder Kurong. He said, "I, Jiumozhi, a junior from Tibet, pay my respects to an eminent monk of an elder generation. Eternal or not

eternal//twin trees bloom and wither//north and south, east and west//not false, not empty!”

Duan Yu wondered to himself, “What did those four lines mean?” But Elder Kurong felt a shock in his heart. “The Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel is reputed to possess a vast and boundless learning. He lives up to his reputation! As soon as he saw me, he laid bare the history behind my practice of ‘Withered Meditation.’

In a past age, the great forefather of Buddhism, Sakyamuni, passed away from the world between the twin Sal trees of the city of Kusinara. He was surrounded in every direction by twin Sal trees. Each twin tree had one side which was blooming, and another side which was withered. They became known as the “Four Withered, Four Blooming.” According to Buddhist scriptures, the twin trees to the east had the meaning of, “Eternal and ephemeral.” Those to the south had the meaning of “Joyful and joyless.” The twin trees to the west signified “Myself and not myself,” and the twin trees to the north signified “Peaceful and restless.” The flourishing and blooming trees symbolized the truth and reality of nirvana: “Eternal, joyful, myself, peaceful.” The withered trees symbolized the real world: “Ephemeral, joyless, not myself, and restless.” The Tathagata Buddha passed away between these eight states of existence; the hidden meaning of this was, ‘neither withered nor blooming, neither false nor empty.’

Elder Kurong had been quietly practicing the art of ‘Withered Meditation’ for decades now, but had only managed to reach the level of being ‘half withered, half blooming’. He was unable to progress to the next level of being ‘neither withered nor blooming, but also withered and also blooming.’ Upon hearing the words of the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, he immediately became stern and said, “Enlightened Lord, you have come from afar but I did not come out to greet you. Forgive my discourtesy.”

Jiumozhi, the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, replied, "This junior monk has long heard of and admired the glorious fame of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. For me to be able to see its stately and grand structures is a source of great joy to me."

Abbot Benyin said, "Enlightened Lord, please be seated." Jiumozhi thanked him and sat down.

Duan Yu thought to himself, "I wonder what this 'Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel' looks like?" He quietly turned his head and snuck a look past Elder Kurong's side. He saw a monk wearing a white cassock seated on a hassock in the western corner. He was not yet fifty years of age. His face was inclined upwards and seemed to have a precious light emanating from it, similar to that of brilliant pearls or precious jade, a natural sheen. After taking but a few glances at him, Duan Yu felt a sense of veneration and kinship towards him. Taking a glance outside the door, he saw eight or nine brutes with savage and fearful appearances. Clearly, they were not from the Central Plains; thus, they must be attendants or servants which the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel brought from Tibet.

Jiumozhi folded his hands together and said, "Thus spoketh the Buddha: 'Without birth, there is no death; without filth, there is no purity.' My mind is slow and dull; I am unable to see past love and hate, life and death. In all my life, I have had an extremely close bosom friend; he is a man of the Great Song's Gusu's province, surnamed Murong, with his personal name being Bo. In the distant past, I met with him by chance and discussed martial arts and swordplay with him. Mr. Murong had a deep knowledge regarding every single martial arts form in the entire world. He gave me pointers and tips for many days. I have always remembered this. I will never dare to forget the great benevolence and deep kindness which Mr. Murong showed me in transmitting to me so many high-level skills and techniques. Unexpectedly, heaven did not extend a gift of

long life to the great hero, and Mr. Murong has departed to the Western Heaven to enjoy bliss. I have a presumptuous request which I hope all of you elders can grant.”

Abbot Benyin said, “Enlightened Lord, your close relationship with Mr. Murong was no doubt predestined. Now that the karmic ties which bound you have come to an end, why try to force it? Mr. Murong is now enjoying the delights of the Western Heaven, greeting Buddha before his lotus pool. How could he possibly still care about the martial arts learning of the mortal world? Enlightened Lord, isn’t it a bit pointless for you to act in such a way?”

Jiumozhi replied, “Abbot, your advice is very cogent. But from birth my disposition has been silly and wild. Despite secluding myself in solitary meditation for over forty days, I nonetheless found it impossible to forget my former friendship with him. In the past, when Mr. Murong was discussing the sword techniques of the world with me, he was resolute in his opinion that the ‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’ was the best in the world. The fact that he never had a chance to see it with his own eyes was his greatest regret in all his life.”

Abbot Benyin said, “Our monastery is secluded here in the distant south. For us to be esteemed so highly by Mr. Murong is a great honor for us. But why is it that in the past, Mr. Murong himself did not come personally to ask for a chance to see the manuscript of this skill?”

Jiumozhi let out a long sigh. A grieved expression was on his face, and he did not speak for a long time. Finally, he said, “Mr. Murong knew that this manuscript was the most precious treasure of this venerable monastery, transmitted down generation to generation. Naturally, he would not be permitted to view it. He knew that the Duan family, despite being the rulers of Dali, had never forgotten the code of righteousness and their former ties with the jianghu. He knew that the Duan family loved the common man and was filled with benevolence. He could not bring himself to steal

or forcibly take the manuscript.” Benyin thanked him, saying, “Mr. Murong praised us too highly. Since Mr. Murong esteemed Dali’s Duan family so highly, you yourself as his close friend, Enlightened Lord, should take his wishes into consideration.”

Jiumozhi replied, “But that day, I made a regrettable boast; I said to him, ‘I am the national instructor of Tibet, without any relations with Dali as well, and Tibet itself has no diplomatic relations with Dali. Mr. Murong, if it’s inconvenient for you to retrieve it, allow me to do so for you!’ After a man has made a promise, he cannot go back on it no matter what! I made this promise to Mr. Murong, and no matter what, I cannot renege on it!” And as he spoke, he lightly clapped three times. From outside, two of his men brought a wooden chest into the room, setting it down on the floor. Jiumozhi simply flicked his sleeve, and the chest calmly opened by itself, exposing a brilliant, gleaming, small golden box. Jiumozhi withdrew the golden box and held it within his hand.

Abbot Benying thought to himself, “Does he think that we monastic folks might be moved by precious treasures and gifts? Besides, after administering Dali for over a hundred and fifty years, how could the Duan family lack for gold or silver ornaments?” He watched as Jiumozhi opened the lid of the golden box and withdrew the contents. It was actually a trio of old, worn books. As Jiumozhi casually turned the books over, Benyin shot them a look. The books had both pictures and words, written in cinnabar ink. Jiumozhi stared at the books for a long time. Suddenly, tears began to fall from his eyes, splattering on his clothes. He had a look of uncontrollable grief on his face. Benyin and the rest were all totally astonished.

Elder Kurong said, “Enlightened Lord, you miss your old friend and are unable to sever your attachments. Aren’t you ashamed to be called an ‘eminent monk’?” Hanging his head, Jiumozhi said, “Master, you possess great wisdom and

remarkable ability. I cannot measure up to you. These three books are filled with top-level martial arts techniques, and were written down by Mr. Murong himself. They explain the essence and training methodology behind Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques, as well as the way by which one might defeat them."

Everyone who was listening was shocked. They thought to themselves, "The fame of Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques shakes the world. Supposedly, aside from an extremely wise monk who managed to learn twenty three of these techniques at the beginning of the Song dynasty, no one has ever learned more than twenty. For Mr. Murong to be able to understand the essence of Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques is very difficult to believe. The claim that he actually managed to figure out the weaknesses of each technique is even less believable."

Jiumozhi continued, "Mr. Murong gifted these three scrolls to me. I studied them intently, and reaped great benefits from them. My desire is that I might exchange these three precious scrolls for your venerable monastery's scroll of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. If all of the eminent monks here would be willing to permit me to fulfill my promise, my gratitude would be boundless."

Abbot Benyin was silent. He thought to himself, "If the skills written on these three scrolls really are that of the Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques of Shaolin, then after acquiring them, we would not merely be on par with Shaolin in terms of martial arts knowledge, but surpass them. The Heavenly Dragon Monastery would have a thorough understanding of Shaolin's best techniques, but Shaolin would have no knowledge of ours."

Jiumozhi continued, "After your respected monastery gifts me with the original scroll of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', please feel free to keep a copy of it for yourself. This means that despite allowing me to pay my respects to Mr. Murong, you yourselves would not suffer any loss at all.

Secondly, immediately after you give me the scroll, I will seal it. I will not sneak a single glance at it, and personally take it to the grave of Mr. Murong where I will burn it. Thus, you have no need to worry about your elite arts being leaked out. Third, although the martial arts understanding of you, respected reverends, is deep and requires nothing from outside, as the saying goes, a stone from another mountain can be used to polish one's own precious jade. Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques have many hidden secrets, and in particular, their "Flower Plucking Finger" [Nianhua Zhi], "Pattra Leaf Finger" [Duoluoye Zhi], and the "Formless Raiding Finger" [Wuxiang Jie Zhi] have many similarities to your own 'Solitary Yang Finger'.

When Abbot Benyin and the others had first read the golden letter which he had sent them, they believed that he intended to forcibly demand they hand over their precious treasure to them. Such would be an unreasonable, tyrannical act. But now, hearing him speak tirelessly, they began to feel as though his words were very reasonable. It seemed to them that agreeing to his request would bring great benefit to the Heavenly Dragon Temple, without them incurring any losses. It now seemed that he was actually bringing them a great gift instead. Benxiang was a person who liked to get along with others; in his heart, he had already acquiesced. But because Benyin was the abbot, and because Kurong was of an elder generation, it was not for him to speak.

Jiumozhi said, "I am young and my learning is shallow; my words alone might not be enough to win the trust of all of the senior monks here. Please permit me to show some meager skill that I possess with the three finger techniques of Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques." As he spoke, he rose to his feet. "In the past, I only casually skimmed through the manual and learned the techniques to a superficial degree. My technique is very sloppy; I hope that all of you will give me some pointers. This technique is the "Flower Plucking Finger." He gently touched his right hand's

thumb with his index finger, as though he had just plucked a fresh, lovely flower. A small smile was on his face, as he gently flicked all five digits of his left hand towards the right.

Aside from Duan Yu, everyone present was a martial arts expert who had specialized in and analyzed finger techniques for all their life. They saw that the movements of Jiumozhi's fingers were incomparably gentle. Each time he flicked out the fingers of his left hand, it was as though he were flicking away dewdrops from the flower that he was holding with his right hand, but was afraid that he might cause the flower petals to fall. The entire time, an amiable, kind, gentle expression was on his face, giving him an appearance of great wisdom.

According to the legends of Zen Buddhism, Sakyamuni expounded on the Buddhist doctrine at an assembly at Mt. Ling. His fingers plucked a golden Sal flower and showed them to everyone present. Everyone was silent, not understanding; only the Arhat Mahākāśyapa showed a faint smile on his face. Sakyamuni thus knew that Mahākāśyapa had truly understood his mind, and said, "I possess the true Dharma eye, the path to Nirvana, the form of the formless, and the subtle dharma way, which can be neither written down nor taught. I entrust them to Mahākāśyapa." The most important precept in Zen Buddhism was that of achieving enlightenment via inner understanding. Shaolin belonged to the Zen school of Buddhism, and so they naturally spared no efforts in studying and refining this "Flower Plucking Finger".

But there seemed to be nothing remarkable whatsoever in Jiumozhi's flicking movements. After flicking for a few dozen times in succession, he lifted up the right sleeve of his robe and puffed at it. In the blink of an eye, a cascade of chess-piece sized pieces of round cloth descended, revealing dozens of holes within his sleeves. Apparently, the dozens of finger flicks he had demonstrated earlier had all been through-the-air strikes against his own sleeves. The

soft energy released had damaged the cloth, but at first, it had seemed totally unharmed. Only after he gently breathed on it was the effect revealed. Benyin, Benguan, Benxiang, Bencan, and Emperor Baoding all glanced at each other a few times. All of them were secretly astonished. "Based on our level of skill, using the 'Single Solitary Finger' to strike through the air and puncture holes in clothing is not difficult at all. But to execute such a divine technique with such gentle, soft movements, while holding such a placid, smiling expression on our faces is impossible for us. The 'Flower Plucking Finger' is totally different from our 'Single Solitary Finger'; it emphasizes the use of soft 'Yin' energy. There is definitely a great deal we could learn from it, as it is like unto a mirror of our own skills."

Jiumozhi said, with a small smile, "I've embarrassed myself. My skill in the 'Flower Plucking Finger' is far inferior to that of Master Xuandu of Shaolin. My skill in the 'Pattra Leaf Finger' is even more laughable." He immediately turned his body around and began to circle around the wooden box on the floor. He struck out in repeated succession with all ten of his digits. The onlookers watched as scraps of wood on the chest began to fly off the chest and dance around. In the blink of an eye, the wooden chest had been reduced to a pile of wooden scraps.

Emperor Baoding and the others thought that there was nothing special about him destroying a wooden chest with his fingers. But the chest's hinges, copper strips, iron locks, padlocks, and other metal components also completely disintegrated under the pressure of the force of Jiumozhi's fingers. This caused them to be involuntarily shocked yet again.

Smiling, Jiumozhi said, "In exercising this 'Pattra Leaf Finger' technique, I had a tyrannical air. My cultivation in it is shallow indeed!" As he spoke, he folded his hands within the folds of his clothes. Suddenly, that pile of wood and metal scraps began to jump about and dance. It was as

though some person wielding a thin, invisible stick was beating them and stirring them up. When they looked at Jiumozhi, they saw that a calm, smiling expression remained on his face. None of his clothes, from his sleeves to lower hem of his gown, were moving or fluttering in the slightest. Evidently, he was secretly projecting his finger energy from within his clothes, and yet didn't reveal a trace of it at all. Benxiang couldn't control himself and praised, "The 'Formless Raiding Finger' lives up to its name! Admirable, admirable indeed!" Jiumozhi bowed and said, "Master, you praise me too highly. The jumping of the wooden chips is still visible. For the technique to truly match up to its name, it must be both formless and invisible. Even if one spent all of his life assiduously practicing this technique, he might not be able to achieve such a level." Master Benxiang said, "Amongst the scrolls left behind by Mr. Murong, did he include a method by which one can defeat this 'Formless Raiding Finger'?" Jiumozhi replied, "He did. The method by which one can defeat this technique arises from your own honorable religious name." Benxiang mumbled to himself for some time, then said, "Right, one must use the 'True Form' [Benxiang] to overcome the 'Formless' [Wuxiang]. Brilliant, this is extremely brilliant."

Benyin said, "Martial-uncle, the Enlightened Lord has come to us from afar, and his request appears to be genuine and sincere. How should we handle this situation? We respectfully await your instructions."

Elder Kurong said, "Benyin, what is the purpose of our study of martial arts?"

Abbot Benyin never would have imagined that Elder Kurong would have replied to him with such a question. After being stunned a brief moment, he replied, "To improve our dharma and to protect our nation." Elder Kurong asked, "When an evil opponent appears, whom we are unable to dissuade using Buddhism due to our shallow understanding of dharma, and forces us to use force to subdue him, what

type of martial arts would we use?" Benyin replied, "If we have no choice but to use force, we would naturally use the 'Single Solitary Finger'." Elder Kurong asked, "What level of proficiency have you attained in your mastery of the 'Single Solitary Finger?'" Sweat began to appear on Abbot Benyin's forehead. "Your disciple is slow and stupid by nature, and due to my position am unable to settle down to properly advance. I have only reached the fourth level."

Elder Kurong continued, "In your opinion, how does our 'Single Solitary Finger' compare with Shaolin's 'Flower Plucking Finger', 'Pattra Leaf Finger', and 'Formless Raiding Finger?' Which is stronger, and which is weaker?" Benyin replied, "There is no such thing as 'strength' or 'weakness' in techniques, only in each individual's learning and power." Elder Kurong replied, "Precisely so. And what if our 'Single Solitary Finger' is practiced to the highest level?" Benyin replied, "The depth of the skill is so profound that I dare not wildly speculate." Elder Kurong said, "If you managed to live for another hundred years, what level could you attain?" The sweat on Benyin's forehead dripped down in a steady stream. In a trembling voice, he said, "Your disciple does not know." Elder Kurong asked, "Can you master the highest level?" Benyin replied, "I definitely cannot." Elder Kurong fell silent at this point and spoke no more.

Benyin said, "Martial-uncle, your words are wise. We are not yet even able to fully master the highest levels of our own martial arts skills. What uses have we for books containing the skills and techniques of others? Enlightened Lord, you have made an arduous journey to come here. Let us welcome you properly with a vegetarian meal." In speaking these words, he was tacitly refusing the request of the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel.

Jiumozhi let out a long sigh. "It's all my fault; I shouldn't have opened my mouth and made such a foolish promise. Otherwise, with Mr. Murong dead, what does it matter whether or not I am able to obtain the scroll of the 'Divine

Sword of the Six Meridians'? Today, this young monk is going to be wildly bold and say a few audacious words that may display an exaggerated opinion of my own abilities. If the technique of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' really is as amazing and profound as Mr. Murong believed, I fear that even if your venerable monastery has the scroll, it does not have anyone capable of learning it. If someone here is capable of learning it, then in all likelihood it is not nearly as amazing as Mr. Murong believed it to be."

Elder Kurong said, "This old monk is confused about something. I hope that the Enlightened Lord may instruct me." Jiumozhi said, "I wouldn't dare!" Elder Kurong said, "The fact that the 'Divine Scroll of the Six Meridians' is hidden within our humble temple is concealed even from the secular members of the Duan family. Might I ask, how is it that Mr. Murong learned of this?" Jiumozhi replied, "Mr. Murong's understanding of the martial arts of the world was extremely deep and broad. He even had at his fingertips many skills belonging to various sects which had long been forgotten by even the leaders of the sects themselves. The characters used to describe Mr. Murong, 'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent', comes from this. But all his life, Mr. Murong was never able to learn any of the secrets of the 'Single Solitary Finger' or the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. This troubled him all his life, and he took this regret with him to his grave."

Elder Kurong grunted, then fell silent. Emperor Baoding and the others thought to themselves, "If he really learns the secrets of the 'Single Solitary Finger' and the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', then I fear that he might really be able to use our own techniques against us in the future."

Abbot Benyin said, "It has been well over a decade since my martial-uncle has received any guests. Enlightened Lord, as you are an eminent monk of this era, my martial-uncle made an exception and has accompanied you for a long

time. Enlightened Lord, please.” As he spoke, he rose to his feet, signifying the meeting was at an end.

But Jiumozhi did not rise with him. He unhurriedly said, “The scroll of the ‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’ is only a tool with an undeserved reputation, and has no practical use. Why must your precious temple hold it in such importance, to the point where you would be willing to harm the friendship between the Heavenly Dragon Temple and the Great Wheel Temple, as well as the diplomatic relations of Dali and Tibet?”

Benyin’s face changed slightly. He said in an awe-inspiring way, “Enlightened Lord, are you saying that if the Heavenly Dragon Temple does not hand the manuscript over, that Dali and Tibet will face each other with weapons and armies?” Emperor Baoding had always kept a strong garrison of forces to the northwestern boundaries of the country, so as to keep Tibet from invading. Upon hearing Jiumozhi’s words, he became totally engrossed in the conversation.

Jiumozhi replied, “The master of my country has long yearned for Dali’s local environment and people. He has long desired to meet with your honored country’s master and compete with him. However, I felt that doing so would cause great loss of innocent life, which is greatly in contradiction with the heart of Buddha’s teachings. For many years, I have spared no effort in dissuading him from such a course.”

Benyin and the others were all aware that a veiled threat was hidden within Jiumozhi’s words. He was the national protector and dharma king of Tibet. Everyone in Tibet from the king to the commoners was Buddhist, much like the country of Dali. Jiumozhi always had the trust of the Tibetan king. Whether there would be peace or war with a nation could hinge on a single word from him. It really would not be worth it for the people of their two countries to be forced to endure suffering over a simple manuscript. Tibet was powerful whereas Dali was weak; if war really did break out,

the overall situation would be very dangerous. But how could the Heavenly Dragon Temple freely give up their most precious treasure to him, by virtue of him trying to intimidate them?

Elder Kurong said, "Since you, Enlightened Lord, desire this manuscript so much, far be it for this old monk to deny you. But we dare not agree to exchange it for Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques. Enlightened Lord, as you have mastered all of Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques in addition to the martial arts of the Great Snowy Mountain's Great Wheel Monastery, you are no doubt peerless and without equal in the world."

Jiumozhi clapped his hands together. "Master, do you mean for me to put my incompetence on display?" Elder Kurong said, "Enlightened Lord, you said that our monastery's manuscript of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' is a useless tool, undeserving of its fame, which cannot be used. We will use the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' to experience your elite skills. If it really is as you said, Enlightened Lord, and the technique is unusable and undeserving of its fame, why should we value it? In such a case, Enlightened Lord, feel free to take it!"

Jiumozhi was secretly startled. In the past, when he discussed the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' with Mr. Murong, he learned enough to know that it totally depended on converting internal energy into invisible sword qi. They both felt that no matter how astonishing the techniques were, for a single person to have enough internal energy to use all six of his meridians to create sword qi was most likely impossible. Now, judging from Elder Kurong's words, not only was he capable of using the technique, but all of the other monks around him were as well. The Heavenly Dragon Temple's centuries-long fame clearly was no little thing indeed. His expression had been very polite and respectful all along; now, he became even more polite. Bowing forwards slightly, he said, "It is this humble monk's greatest

fortune for you, honored reverends, to be willing to display such a consummate skill in front of me.”

Abbot Benyin said, “Enlightened Lord, what weapons do you wish to use? Please feel free to take them out now.”

Jiumozhi clapped his hands together. From outside entered a very tall and large man. Jiumozhi spoke a few words of Tibetan to him, and the man nodded while responding. He withdrew a stick of fragrant Tibetan incense from an outside box, handing it to Jiumozhi before retreating from the room.

Everyone present was baffled. The stick of incense would snap at a blow; how could it possibly be used as a weapon? Only to see Jiumozhi hold the stick of incense with his left hand while reaching down to pick up some of the wooden scraps with his right. He gently fixed the stick of incense within the pile of scraps. He repeated this five more times, until he had created a row of six sticks of incense. There was roughly one foot of distance between each stick. Jiumozhi knelt down five feet behind the line of incense. Suddenly, he rubbed his palms together a few times, then thrust them outwards. All six pieces of incense suddenly lit with fire in unison. Everyone present was shocked, thinking to themselves that this person’s internal energy strength had reached an inconceivably high level. But then, they smelled a scent of sulfur from the incense and guessed that the incense had been tipped with gunpowder. Jiumozhi hadn’t actually set them alight with his internal energy; rather, he has used his internal energy to generate friction-based heat to agitate the gunpowder. Although this was still no easy task, it was something which Emperor Baoding and the others could do as well, if they exerted their internal strength.

The smoke from the Tibetan incense was dark green in color. Six lines of the dark green smoke lazily curled upwards towards the ceiling. Jiumozhi cupped his hands together as though he were holding a sphere. He generated his internal

energy, and the six lines of smoke slowly began to curve outwards. Each line headed towards one of the six monks; one to Kurong, one to Benguan, one to Benyin, one to Benxiang, one to Bencan, and one to Empeor Baoding. This type of palm energy which he was releasing was called the "Blazing Flame Sabre". Although it had no form and no substance and was invisible, it could still take a person's life. It was an incomparably powerful technique indeed. At this moment in time, he only wanted to gain the manuscript, not to take someone's life. Thus, he lit these six sticks of incense, so as to reveal the direction and heading of his palm energy. In this way, not only could he display his power and confidence, he could also demonstrate his merciful and benevolent heart. They would only be competing in terms of comparing their relative martial arts proficiencies, rather than trying to kill or injure each other.

Once the six lines of smoke arrived within a meter of Benyin and the others, they came to a halt and became unmoving. Benyin and the others were astonished yet again; it was not too difficult for a person to cause smoke to move using his internal energy, but to cause the drifting, aimless smoke to come to a sudden halt and freeze in the middle of the air was ten times more difficult. Bencan extended the pinky of his left hand, and a stream of energy erupted from his 'Shaochong' acupoint, rushing towards the line of jade smoke in front of him. As soon as that line of smoke came into contact with this stream of energy, it rushed back towards Jiumozhi with incomparable speed. When it reached within two feet of Jiumozhi's body, he increased the energy of his "Blazing Flame Sabre", and it could advance no further. Jiumozhi nodded. "Impressive and worthy of the praise which is heaped on it. The 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' really does have a technique known as the 'Shaoze Sword'." The internal energy of the two clashed repeatedly for many moves. Master Bencan knew that if he remained seated without moving, it would be very difficult

to give free rein to the full power of the technique. He immediately rose to his feet and took three diagonal steps towards the left, with the internal energy from his pinky now attacking diagonally as well. Jiumozhi thrust out his own left hand and immediately blocked the attack.

Benguan's middle finger suddenly straightened, and the power of his 'Zhongchong Sword' rushed forth. Jiumozhi exclaimed, "Excellent! This is the 'Zhongchong Sword' technique!" With a wave of his palm, he blocked the attack. Despite fighting against the two of them simultaneously, he did not seem the slightest bit nervous.

Seated in front of Elder Kurong, Duan Yu continually snuck side glances towards this battle, the likes of which wulin might see only once every thousand years. Although he did not understand martial arts, he could still tell that these eminent monks were using their internal energy to compete in a sword competition with each other. The situation was even more dangerous than if they were wielding actual, physical swords against each other. Fortunately for him, Jiumozhi had prepared those six sticks of incense, and so he was able to see some of their sword and sabre techniques of the three via the movement of the smoke. After watching for over ten stances, he suddenly realized, "I know! That's master Benguan's 'Zhongchong Sword' technique! It is totally identical to the technique which was drawn on his manuscript." He gently unscrolled the manuscript teaching the 'Zhongchong Sword' technique, comparing the movements of the smoke to the sword techniques contained in the manuscript. With it serving as reference, he now understood everything he saw, including Bencan's 'Shaoze Sword' techniques. The techniques of the 'Zhongchong Sword' were majestic and imposing, with large, grand motions; in contrast, the 'Shaoze Sword' flickered here and there, its changes and movements small and refined.

Abbot Benyin saw that his two martial-brothers could not gain the slightest advantage, despite having joined forces. He thought to himself, "We have not yet thoroughly finished our studies of this technique, and can easily run out of attacking strokes. The earlier all six of us join in, the better. The Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel is intelligent to the extreme; right now, it seems as though he is simply observing Bencan and Benguan's techniques. He isn't using all of his abilities." He immediately said, "Brothers Benxiang and Benchen, let us join in as well." He stretched out his index finger, attacking with the 'Shangyang Sword' technique. Following him was Benxiang's 'Shaochong Sword' technique and Emperor Baoding's 'Guanchong Sword' technique. In unison, the three streams of sword qi attacked the the three lines of jade smoke in front of them.

Duan Yu's eyes wandered left and right; he would check out the 'Shaochong Sword' technique, then the 'Guanchong Sword' technique, and then the 'Shangyang Sword' technique. After he compared them to the illustrated manual, he could understand what was going on in general, but by and large everything seemed confused and jumbled to him. Just as he was raptly studying the instructions for the 'Shaochong Sword' technique, he saw Elder Kurong stretch his finger onto the drawings and write, "Only study one at a time. Move on to the next one only after you are done with the previous." Duan Yu's heart jumped; he realized that Elder Kurong was giving him pointers. Turning around, he smiled slightly towards Elder Kurong, so as to express his appreciation.

But as soon as he turned around, the smile on his face immediately froze and became stiff. The face he saw was extremely bizarre. The left side of Elder Kurong's face was healthy and rosy; the skin was smooth and the flesh was abundant, like the face of a young baby. But the right side of his face was like a withered bone; aside from a layer of sallow skin, there wasn't so much as a single scrap of flesh.

With the bones on prominent display, it seemed very much like half of a skeleton's skull. In his startlement, he immediately turned back, his heart pounding madly in his chest. He knew that this was the result of Elder Kurong practicing the 'Withered Glory Meditation' art, but this half-withered, half-healthy face was simply too terrifying. For the moment, he felt as though he couldn't calm down no matter what, only to see Elder Kurong's index finger once more tracing words on the scroll. "Do not waste such a good opportunity. Focus all your attention on studying the sword techniques. Watch by yourself and learn by yourself. That does not count as violating our ancestral commandments."

Duan Yu realized, "Grand martial-uncle Kurong said to my uncle that the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' cannot be taught to secular disciples. Only after he shaved his head and became a monk could he be taught the technique. But for him to now write, 'Watch by yourself and learn by yourself, that does not count as violating our ancestral commandments' implies that the commandments of the ancestors of the Duan family do not specifically forbid secular members of the family from studying the techniques independently. He ordered me to 'Not waste such a good opportunity' and to 'focus all my attention on studying the techniques'. Naturally, he wants me to study and learn by myself right now." He immediately nodded, then began to carefully study his uncle's execution of the 'Guanchong Sword' technique. After more or less understanding it, he moved on to the 'Shaochong Sword' technique and the 'Shangyang Sword' technique.

For ordinary people, the ring finger is the least dexterous, whereas the index finger is the most nimble. Thus, the 'Guanchong Sword' technique strove to achieve victory in a sluggish, simple, and unsophisticated way, whereas the techniques of the 'Shangyang Sword' were ingenious, lively, and difficult to ascertain. The 'Shaochong Sword' was similar to the 'Shaoze Sword' technique in that it used the pinky;

however, one was on the left hand, whereas one was on the right hand. Thus, in terms of technique, the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' had techniques that were 'skilled' as well as 'clumsy', 'nimble' as well as 'sluggish'. And yet, the 'clumsy' techniques were not any less wonderful, nor the 'sluggish' techniques contain any less might. They were just displayed in different ways.

At first, Duan Yu had just been curious. He was simply comparing the movements of the jade smoke to the techniques written down on the scrolls; it was something akin to guessing riddles. Only now, after receiving directions from Elder Kurong, did he settle down and seriously watch the battle. By the time he more or less understood the techniques of the 'Shangyang Sword', 'Shaochong Sword', and 'Guanchong Sword', Benguan and Bencan were beginning to repeat their respective sets of movements and attacks. Duan Yu no longer needed to refer to the manuscript each time. The movements of the jade smoke were identical to the sword techniques which he had memorized. He felt as though the lines and techniques drawn on the paper were rigid and inflexible, whereas the movement of the jade smoke underwent boundless changes and transformations. The techniques were much richer and more diverse by far than the ones actually written on the scroll.

After watching for a while longer, he saw that Benyin, Benxiang, and Emperor Baoding's techniques had been exhausted as well. Benxiang flicked out his pinky, striking with the 'Parting Flowers, Flicking Willows' technique. It was the second time he had used this technique. Jiumozhi nodded slightly. Following this, Benyin and Emperor Baoding could not help but repeat previously used techniques as well. Suddenly, a 'chi-chi' sound could be heard from in front of Jiumozhi, and the power of his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' increased dramatically, forcing back the internal energy of the five.

As it were, Jiumozhi initially remained on the defensive, desiring to see the techniques of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' in its entirety before counterattacking. Now that he had changed from defense to offense, the five lines of smoke whirled about in the air with incomparable nimbleness. But that sixth line of smoke remained calmly unmoving in front of Elder Kurong, still three feet away from him and not moving in the slightest. Elder Kurong desired to know the exact extent of his abilities and see how long he could hold out, fighting with five lines of smoke but holding the sixth stock still. This was why that entire time he hadn't extended his own hand to attack. And, sure enough, Jiumozhi really did expend a rather considerable amount of energy keeping that sixth stream of smoke still. But now, that line of jade smoke finally began to inch its way towards the back of Elder Kurong's skull.

Alarmed, Duan Yu said, "Grand martial-uncle, the jade smoke is attacking!" Elder Kurong nodded, then unrolled the 'Shaoshang Sword' manuscript and placed it in front of Duan Yu. Duan Yu saw that the illustrations of the 'Shaoshang Sword' manuscript were made in the splash-ink style, similar to the style used for scenic paintings. The horizontal and vertical lines were tilted and few in number, but the sword technique was strong and vigorous, with the capability of shattering the earth and battering the heavens, containing within it the power of the wind and the rain. Duan Yu studied the sword manuscript, but could not forget about the stream of jade smoke that was floating towards the back of Elder Kurong's skull. Turning around, he saw that the jade smoke was now only three or four inches away. He cried out in alarm, "Careful!"

Elder Kurong flipped his hands over, then extended the thumbs of both hands. With two 'chi-chi' sounds, they launched separate surprise attacks on Jiumozhi's right shoulder and the right side of his chest. He did not ward off his enemy's assault; rather, he sent two brilliant attacks of

his own to counter-attack his opponent. His judgment was that Jiumozhi's 'Blazing Flame Sabre' internal energy was still not fully released. As it was advancing towards him only slowly, for it to actually harm him would still take it a short while. If, despite moving after Jiumozhi did, his attack arrived first, he would be able to catch Jiumozhi offguard.

Jiumozhi was a careful and contemplative person. Long ago, he had prepared a stream of palm energy which protected his chest. But he had only anticipated a single, ferocious attack from the 'Shaoshang Sword', and did not foresee Elder Kurong would launch twin surprise attacks at the same time and threaten two different areas. Jiumozhi raised his palm and used it to block the attack on the right side of his chest. Following that, he kicked upwards with his right foot, hurriedly propelling himself backwards. But no matter how quickly he retreated, he could not move faster than the sword qi, which arrived with the speed of the thunder and the lightning. With a soft sound, the top of the robe on his shoulder split open, and fresh blood spilled forth. Elder Kurong reversed his thumbs, retracting his internal energy and pulling back towards him. All six sticks of incense snapped simultaneously. Benyin, Emperor Baoding, and the rest also withdrew their fingers and dissipated their sword energy. Each of them had fought for a long time without achieving success and had been secretly anxious for a long time now. Only now did they feel relieved.

Jiumozhi walked back inside the room. A small smile on his lips, he said, "Elder Kurong, your Meditation Arts are extraordinary indeed. This humble monk admires you greatly. But as for that 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', well, it seems it really is nothing more than a tool with an undeserved reputation." Abbot Benyin said, "How is it nothing more than a useless tool? I must ask that you enlighten us." Jiumozhi said, "What the venerable Mr. Murong admired was the sword techniques of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', not the sword formation. This

sword formation of the Heavenly Dragon Temple really is very powerful, but if we were to compare it with Shaolin's 'Arhat Sword Formation' or Kunlun sect's 'Chaos Sword Formation', it can only be said to be on the same level, and cannot be said to be the most unparalleled sword technique in the world." By describing it as a 'Sword Formation' instead of as a 'Sword Technique', he was pointing out the fact that all six of them fought in unison with a pre-planned formation, rather than one of them using the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' by himself, as he, Jiumozhi, had done with his 'Blazing Flame Sabre'.

Abbot Benyin felt that his words were indeed reasonable, and was at a loss for a response. But Bencan only coldly sneered, "Regardless of whether it was a 'Sword Technique' or a 'Sword Formation', were you, Enlightened Lord, the victor in that competition? Or was the Heavenly Dragon Temple the victor in that competition."

Jiumozhi did not reply. Closing his eyes, he silently meditated for the time it takes to drink a cup of tea. Opening his eyes, he said, "In the first round, your respected monastery took the upper hand. But in the second round, I believe I am guaranteed victory." Benyin was startled. He asked, "Enlightened Lord, you want to compete in another round?" Jiumozhi replied, "A man must live up to his words. Since I have already given my word to Mr. Murong, how can I back off at the first sight of difficulty?" Benyin asked, "And why is it that you are guaranteed of victory, Enlightened Lord?"

Jiumozhi smiled slightly. "Everyone here has a profound and deep understanding of martial arts. Can it be that you cannot guess? Please prepare to receive my stances!" As he spoke, his two palms slowly pushed outwards. Elder Kurong, Benyin, Emperor Baoding, and the other three simultaneously felt as though two streams of internal energy were suddenly attacking from different directions. Benyin and the others all felt that they could not use the 'Divine

Sword of the Six Meridians' to block this energy attack. Each of them faced two streams of energy, and pushed out with palms to block the attack. Only Elder Kurong continued to thrust out the thumbs of both of his hands, using the 'Shaoyang Sword' technique to receive the opponent's energy.

After pushing out this twin burst of palm energy, Jiumozhi immediately halted his attack. "Excuse me for offending you!"

Benyin, Benguan, and the others all traded glances. All of them understood, "With a single palm, he was able to send out so many streams of internal energy. If Elder Kurong were to launch another concerted double-attack on him, he would be able to withstand it. But we, on the other hand, would have to give up the sword techniques and use palm techniques. It seems our 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' is inferior to his 'Blazing Flame Sabre.'"

Just at this very moment, smoke could be seen rising up from in front of Elder Kurong. Four distinct lines of black smoke drifted upwards, then moved towards Jiumozhi. Jiumozhi held a deep, secret dread of this old monk who sat facing the wall and never turned around a single time. Now, seeing the smoke head towards him and not knowing what the old monk's intention was, Jiumozhi once again executed his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' technique to ward off all four lines of smoke. He did not immediately launch a counterattack, both so that he would not be caught off-guard by a simultaneous attack from Benyin and the others, as well as to enable himself to calmly see if Elder Kurong had any other fearsome techniques.

The black smoke grew thicker and thicker, showing that the attack was extremely aggressive. Jiumozhi was secretly surprised. "To launch an all-out attack like this is like the saying that a windstorm cannot last all morning, and a rainstorm cannot last all evening. How can this possibly be sustained? Elder Kurong is an eminent monk of this age.

How could he use such a rash, aggressive method to fight his opponent?" He felt that Elder Kurong couldn't possibly be that inexperienced; thus, he must have some other trick up his sleeve. He immediately tightened his defenses and raised his guard mentally, preparing himself to immediately act as according to the situation. After a short period of time, the four lines of smoke suddenly began to split. One became two, two became four, four became eight, eight became sixteen, rushing towards Jiumozhi from all directions. Jiumozhi thought to himself, "An arrow at the end of its flight is a spent force. Nothing worth even talking about." He executed his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' technique and blocked every single line. As soon as his internal energy touched the lines of smoke, they split and fell apart, filling the entire room with smoke in the blink of an eye. Jiumozhi was not worried in the slightest, generating his internal energy to protect his entire body.

As the smoke and the mist thinned by degrees, he could hazily see that Benyin and the other five monks were on their knees, a solemn expression on their faces. A look of great grief and indignation could be seen on the faces of Bencan and Benguan in particular. In a moment of clarity, Jiumozhi suddenly realized the truth. He secretly cried out, "Oh no! This old monk, Kurong, knows that they aren't a match for me, so he actually burned the manuscript of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians!'"

His guess was correct. Elder Kurong had used the force of his 'Solitary Yang Finger' to set the six manuscripts ablaze. Afraid that Jiumozhi would prevent him from doing so and snatch the manuscripts by force, he used his internal energy to push the smoke towards Jiumozhi, forcing Jiumozhi to stay on the defense and exert his efforts towards protecting himself. By the time the smoke dissipated, the drawings had been long since reduced to ashes. Benyin and the others were experts of the 'Solitary Yang Finger' who had spent many years mastering it. As soon as they saw the black

smoke, they knew what caused it. They thought to themselves that their martial-uncle would rather die with glory than live with dishonor [lit., 'would rather be a broken jade vessel than an unbroken clay pot'] and was willing to destroy this most precious treasure of their monastery rather than let it fall into enemy hands. Fortunately, the six of them had each memorized a portion of the technique. Once their powerful enemy departed, they would simply recreate it from memory. Only, a priceless artifact which had been handed down to them by their ancestors had been totally destroyed.

Now, the Heavenly Dragon Temple and the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel had formed between them a long, deep, and bitter enmity. It would be difficult for there to be any sort of peace between them.

Jiumozhi was both startled and angry. He usually had a very high opinion of his own intelligence and stratagems, but today he had been defeated by Elder Kurong twice in a row and witnessed the destruction of the manual of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', earning himself a bitter enemy without any reward at all. He stood up and folded his palms together. "Elder Kurong, why did you need to be rigid and inflexible to such an extent? That you would rather shatter the manuscript than allow it to fall in the hands of others shows your lofty style and temperament. That your venerable monastery's most precious treasure was destroyed in part due to the actions of this humble monk is a source of great regret for me. Fortunately, it was impossible for any one person to fully learn the martial arts on this manuscript. Thus, it does not really matter whether or not it was destroyed. I take my leave now."

He turned around slightly. Not waiting for Elder Kurong or Abbot Benyin to reply, he suddenly struck out and seized Emperor Baoding's wrist, grabbing his wrist acupoints and saying, "My humble country's ruler has long wished to meet

with Emperor Baoding. Your Majesty, I'll have to invite you to make a journey to Tibet with me."

Everyone was greatly startled by this totally unexpected turn of events. This sneak attack was executed so unexpectedly that despite Emperor Baoding's own formidable level of martial arts, Emperor Baoding fell to it. Jiumozhi had seized the "Lieque" and "Pianli" acupoints on his wrist. Emperor Baoding hurriedly exerted his internal energy to protect himself. In the blink of an eye, he had made seven attempts to break loose, but was unable to each time. Abbot Benyin and everyone else present felt that this ambush was too despicable and contemptible, totally not in keeping with his station as an elite martial artist. However, they managed to control their anger, and yet remained unable to think of a plan for rescue. With Emperor Baoding's acupoints under the control of the opponent, his life could be taken at any point in time.

Elder Kurong laughed. "He once was Emperor Baoding, but has since abdicated and become a monk. His religious name is Benchen. Benchen, since the ruler of Tibet wishes to meet you, you might as well go." Helpless, Emperor Baoding could only say, "Yes!" He knew what Elder Kurong was trying to do. Jiumozhi considered him the ruler of a country, and thus a priceless hostage. But with Elder Kurong describing him as having already abdicated his throne, he was no longer a priceless royal hostage, but only a monk of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, making him a useless personage of little importance. Perhaps, in that case, Jiumozhi would release him.

Ever since Jiumozhi had entered the Muni Pavilion, Emperor Baoding had not said a single word or revealed a single hint of his real origins. But, in order to execute even a single sword of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', one must be a first class master martial artist, with an extraordinarily deep and profound internal energy cultivation. The people within the wulin who could be

considered first class masters were well aware of who the others were. Jiumozhi had not come to Dali unprepared. Before arriving, he had carefully made inquiries regarding the appearance and ages of each and every member of Dali's Duan family, as well as the disciples of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. He had an eighty or ninety percent understanding of each person's temperament, habits, and achievements in martial arts. He knew that aside from Elder Kurong, the Heavenly Dragon Monastery had four more martial arts masters. Now, a 'Benchen' had appeared out of nowhere, a person he had never heard of before, and with an extremely powerful internal energy that was not one whit inferior to the four other 'Ben' generation monks. Seeing his majestic poise and judging from his features that he came from a luxurious background, Jiumozhi guessed that he was Emperor Baoding.

Hearing Elder Kurong say that Emperor Baoding had already abdicated the throne and become a monk, Jiumozhi's heart was swayed. "I've long heard that in each succeeding dynasty, the Duan's of Dali would often abdicate and join the monastery. It is not altogether unbelievable that Emperor Baoding might do the same and join the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. But if an Emperor were to abdicate and become a monastery, there would be grand ceremonies held throughout the country, with gifts of food being given to monks and rituals made before the Buddha. Pagodas would be renovated and new temples would be built. It would be a huge public affair, not something kept so low-key and under wraps. Even my Tibet would, upon hearing the news, send an envoy to congratulate the new monarch. There's some trickery involved here."

He replied, "Regardless of whether or not Emperor Baoding has abdicated, he still needs to make a trip with me and pay a visit to my humble country's ruler." As he spoke, he tugged on Emperor Baoding's hand, intending to immediately exit.

Benyin loudly shouted, "Wait a moment!" His form flickered, and he, along with Bencan and the other monks, simultaneously moved in front of the door. Jiumozhi said, "I have no intentions of harming Emperor Baoding, but if all of you force me to, then there's no other options I can take." His right hand feinted towards the back of Emperor Baoding's heart. The power of his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' was all-conquering and unstoppable. With Emperor Baoding's meridians already under Jiumozhi's control, Emperor Baoding was helpless to resist and had no way to defend himself. If all of the monks of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery were to attack at once, not only would they fear 'breaking the dishes in order to pelt the rat', they still could not be certain of victory. And yet, Abbot Benyin and the others were still hesitant. Emperor Baoding was the ruler of Dali. How could they allow an enemy to kidnap him and march him away under duress?

Jiumozhi loudly shouted, "I've long heard of the fame of the eminent monks of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. I never would have imagined that they would be so irresolute over such a small matter, like little boys or girls. Please make way for me!"

After seeing his uncle being captured, Duan Yu was extremely anxious. At first, he thought to himself that with his uncle's level of martial arts, there was no need to fear. He thought that his uncle was just being patient for now, and when the right moment came, he would free himself. But the more he watched, the more Duan Yu felt that something wasn't right. There was a look of great arrogance on Jiumozhi's face and his words were proud and overbearing, whereas Benyin, Benguan, and the others looked anxious, angry, and helpless. As he watched Jiumozhi head towards the exit with Emperor Baoding in tow, Duan Yu was filled with fear and worry. Without pausing to think, he shouted, "Hey you! Let go of my uncle!" Following this, he came out from behind Elder Kurong.

Jiumozhi had long ago seen a young man hiding behind Elder Kurong, but was unable to guess who that person might be, much less the reason why he was sitting in front of Elder Kurong. Now, seeing him come out, his curiosity compelled him to turn his head and ask, "Might I ask who you are, sir?"

Duan Yu replied, "Don't ask me who I am! Let go of my uncle first!" Stretching out his right hand, he seized Emperor Baoding's left hand.

Emperor Baoding said, "Yu'er, don't mind me! Leave quickly and go to your father, and tell him to immediately ascend the throne and take on this heavy responsibility! I am an old monk who is like a lazy cloud or an untamed crane; what is there to be concerned about?"

Duan Yu exerted all his strength to pull at Emperor Baoding's wrist while shouting, "Quickly let go of my uncle!" The 'Shaoshang' acupoint of his thumb was touching the acupoints on Emperor Baoding's wrist. With him now exerting his strength, Emperor Baoding's entire body trembled, and he immediately felt his internal energy flowing outwards.

At this exact same point in time, Jiumozhi also felt his internal energy being drawn away from him. His countenance immediately changed drastically. He thought to himself, "How is it that the Duan dynasty of Dali learned the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation?'" He immediately gathered his internal energy to fight against this evil, heterodox martial arts.

Emperor Baoding immediately felt as though two fierce and powerful streams of energy were jerking at his body. He immediately used the technique of 'Borrowing a Sabre to Strike a Knife', forcing these two streams of internal energy to directly face each other. At this moment in time, these two streams of energy were principally facing off against each other with very little focused on his wrists. With a wave of his hand, he broke free from Jiumozhi's grip. Together with

Duan Yu, he floated backwards and retreated. He cried out to himself, "How shameful! That I was able to escape is all thanks to Yu'er."

[Translator's note: DRATS! Too bad Emperor Baoding is such a martial arts master, else Duan Yu would now have the internal energy of Jiumozhi, his own (which should be superior to Jiumozhi), AND that of Emperor Baoding by the start of chapter 11. What fun!]

Jiumozhi was more than a little bit startled by this turn of events. He thought to himself, "Another powerful martial artist suddenly appeared in the Central Plains. How could I have been totally unaware of this? This person is very young and is only around twenty years of age. How could he have reached such a level of martial arts? He addressed Emperor Baoding as uncle; he must be of a younger generation in Dali's Duan family." He slowly nodded and said, "I've always thought that the Duan family of Dali only specialized in their own ancestral martial arts. Only now do I know that a learned member of their latter generation made friends with the Old Man of Xingxiu and studied the strange martial arts technique known as the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation.' Strange, how very strange!"

Although his martial arts learning was profound and vast, even he mistook Duan Yu's 'Divine Art of the Northern Darkness' as the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation'. Only, wanting to conduct himself according to the dignity of his station, he changed 'Old Freak' into 'Old Man' in referring to Ding Chunqiu. Likewise, the people of Wulin all considered the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation' as a vile art and an evil skill; he chose to describe it as a 'strange martial arts technique'. Just now, in their brief exchange, he felt that Duan Yu's internal energy cultivation was definitely not inferior at all to that of Ding Chunqiu, the Old Freak of Xingxiu. He definitely was not Ding Chunqiu's disciple or student, and thus used the phrase "made friends with".

Emperor Baoding let out a cold laugh. "I've long heard that the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel was wise and farsighted, flexible and accommodating, with extraordinary understanding and knowledge. I wouldn't have imagined he would say such absurd things. The Old Freak of Xingxiu is an expert at plotting and sneak-attacking, despicable and without shame. How can the the sons of the Duan family possibly have any relationship with him?" Jiumozhi's face reddened slightly, and his heart trembled. The eight words Emperor Baoding had used, 'Plotting and sneak-attacking, despicable and without shame', were clearly meant to refer to his own earlier actions.

Duan Yu said, "As you, the Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel, have come from afar and are a guest of the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, we have received you with propriety and respect. But you dare to offend my uncle? The only reason we had been showing forbearance and restraint at every turn is because everyone here is a disciple of Buddha, but you have only become more and more overbearing and arrogant. Who, amongst Buddhist disciples, is as flagrant in breaking monastic principles as you are?"

Everyone, hearing Duan Yu righteously castigate Jiumozhi, felt secretly grateful towards him. At the same time, they became even more on guard, fearing that Jiumozhi might suddenly fly into a rage and suddenly launch an attack against Duan Yu to harm him.

They did not expect that Jiumozhi would remain calm and composed. He said, "Today, I have become acquainted with so many eminent personages. It has been my great fortune. I ask that you exchange a few stances with me as well, so as to allow this humble monk to gained great benefit from your tutelage." Duan Yu said, "I don't know martial arts and I've never learned it." Jiumozhi laughed. "Wise, wise. I take my leave!" Leaning slightly, with a sweep of his sleeves he struck out with both arms and simultaneously launched four

attacks using his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' technique, chopping towards Duan Yu.

The enemy had just launched an attack on him using his most ferocious skill, but Duan Yu remained muddle headed and ignorant. Emperor Baoding and Benxiang struck out with their fingers simultaneously, receiving and blocking these four attacks from Jiumozhi's 'Blazing Flame Sabre'. Only, under the sudden assault of Jiumozhi's vigorous internal energy, both of their bodies swayed. Benxiang let out a 'wa' cry and vomited out a mouthful of fresh blood.

Only after seeing Benxiang vomit blood did Duan Yu understand that Jiumozhi had just then launched yet another sneak attack. He was absolutely enraged. Pointing at Jiumozhi's nose, he cursed, "You couth, unreasonable barbarian monk!" With his exertion of energy from his right index finger, his mind and his internal energy connected, and he naturally executed an attack from the 'Shangyang Sword' technique. His internal energy was extremely powerful. In this day and age, extremely few people had reached such a level. Just previously, he had studied the manuscripts of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' while hiding in front of Elder Kurong, and also watched the invisible sword fighting of the seven elder monks. Now, as he struck out with his finger, his mind unconsciously followed the instructions on the manual. With a 'chi' sound, a simple, vigorous, and incomparably powerful energy stabbed towards Jiumozhi.

Startled, Jiumozhi hurriedly used a palm strike from the 'Blazing Flame Blade' technique to receive the attack. Duan Yu's attack not only surprised Jiumozhi; it was also wildly out of the expectations of Elder Kurong, Abbot Benyin, and the others. The ones who were the most surprised of all were Emperor Baoding and Duan Yu himself. Duan Yu thought to himself, "Huh. That was weird. I just pointed at him. Why did this monk act so hurriedly to 'block' my point? Oh, I get it, I get it. It must be that I accidentally pointed at him in

accordance with the techniques of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', and he thought that I knew how to use it. Haha, since that's the case, I might as well scare him a bit!" He loudly said, "What's so remarkable about this 'Shangyang Sword' technique! Take a look at the 'Zhongchong Sword' techniques!" As he spoke, he struck out with his middle finger. But this time, although his technique was correct, the internal energy did not rush out as it did before. He was just pointing aimlessly in the air, without any actual effect.

Jiumozhi, seeing him strike out with his middle finger, immediately gathered his internal energy to resist the attack. He didn't expect that the 'attack' didn't contain an ounce of internal energy. At first, he thought that his opponent was trying to confuse him, interchanging 'solid' with 'void'. He saw Duan Yu strike out a second time, but once again it was empty and without any power behind it at all. He couldn't help but feel delight in his heart. He thought to himself, "I was just wondering how someone who could use the 'Shaoshang Sword' technique could also be able to use the 'Zhongchong Sword' technique. Looks like I was right. This kid is just bluffing. Scared me for a moment!"

During this trip to the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, he had fallen flat on his face, so to speak, several times in a row now. He thought to himself that if he didn't show off his power a bit, the fame and prestige of the 'Enlightened Lord of the Great Wheel' would suffer more than a bit of harm. His left palm immediately chopped towards both the left and the right, sealing off any rescue paths which Emperor Baoding and the others might use to aid Duan Yu. Then, he chopped out with his right palm, striking at Duan Yu's right shoulder. This technique, 'White Rainbow Pierces the Sun', was a marvelous and brilliant technique from his 'Blazing Flame Sabre' skill. He was intending to cut off Duan Yu's right arm with a single chop. Emperor Baoding, Benyin, Bencan, and

the others cried out in unison, "Careful!" Each of them struck out with a finger towards Jiumozhi.

The three of them were naturally using the first-class martial arts principle of 'forcing an enemy into a position where he cannot help but withdraw to defend himself' in their attack. Jiumozhi had already used his internal energy to protect all the critical points on his body. He didn't draw back his attack on Duan Yu in the slightest, and chopped perfectly straight down. Hearing the alarmed cries from Emperor Baoding and the others, Duan Yu knew that he was in a bad situation. He pushed outwards vigorously with both hands. His mind in a state of panic, his internal energy natural flowed out. The 'Shaochong Sword' of his right hand and the 'Shaoze Sword' of his left hand simultaneously struck out, dissolving the power of the stroke of the 'Blazing Flame Sabre' aimed at him. There was still plenty of energy left over from his strike, and with a 'chi chi' sound, the two attacks counter-assaulted Jiumozhi. Jiumozhi didn't have time to think, immediately sending internal energy to his left hand to ward off the attack.

After being provoked into striking out for the past few times, Duan Yu had the vague notion that it was necessary for one to first gather his internal energy, and then agitate it to strike out with a finger; only then could his internal strength and power be unleashed. But as to why this was the cause, he had no clue at all. He lightly struck out with his middle finger, once more shooting forth the 'Zhongchong Sword'. In a blink of an eye, all of the techniques he had learned from the six manuscripts rushed to the front of his mind. All ten of his fingers struck out continuously, attacking here and there in an inexhaustible onslaught.

Jiumozhi was astounded, and hurriedly generated his internal energy to resist the attacks. Sword qi criss crossed the small room, and sabre energy danced in the air. It was as though countless miniature thunderbolts or raging gales were repeatedly clashing against each other midair. After

fighting for a while, Jiumozhi felt as though his opponent's internal energy was only growing stronger and stronger, and his sword techniques were boundless without fathom, as though creating new stances on the spot. It was totally different from his earlier fight with Benyin, Benxiang, and the others, where they were rigidly sticking to a pre-set formula; in contrast, the variations were much more difficult to predict and fathom. He was not aware that Duan Yu was not able to memorize all of the complicated changes and transformations within the sword techniques of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', and was simply randomly piercing and stabbing about in a critical situation, much less inventing new stances on the spot. In his heart, he was both shocked and regretful. "The Heavenly Dragon Monastery actually has such a young and extraordinarily skilled master as this person. Today, I really did bring about my own humiliation!" Suddenly, he struck out three times, with three 'chi' sounds, before calling out, "Hold your hand!"

Duan Yu's internal strength could not be generated or retracted at will. Upon hearing his opponent call for him to halt, he did not know how to cease, and so his only option was to raise his fingers and point them at the ceiling. He thought to himself, "I should stop exerting my strength and hear what he has to say."

Jiumozhi saw that a perplexed look was on Duan Yu's face as he stopped fighting. Earlier, when he was withdrawing his internal energy, Duan Yu acted as though he were baffled and did not know what the hell he was doing at all. Jiumozhi's heart was swayed, and he immediately leapt forwards, striking towards Duan Yu's face with his fist.

Only through great fortune and luck did Duan Yu manage to learn this highest of martial arts techniques, the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. He didn't know any of the most basic empty handed or weapon based martial arts at all. Within this punch of Jiumozhi's was hidden seven or eight separate techniques. This was already a very powerful fist

skill to begin with; now, backed up by the might of the Blazing Flame Sabre's energy, it became an infathomably deep and powerful stroke, impossible for even he himself to measure its strength.

In the martial world, there was no martial artist at all who understood deep martial arts but not superficial ones, who could comprehend complex martial arts not but not simple ones. Duan Yu was the only exception. Seeing Jiumozhi punch towards his face, he awkwardly stretched out his arm to block. Jiumozhi's right palm flipped over, seizing the 'Shenfeng' acupoint on his chest. Duan Yu's entire body immediately felt limp and he could no longer move. The 'Shenfeng' acupoint belonged to the 'Zushaoyinshen' group of acupoints, which he had never practiced in his study of the Divine Art of the Northern Darkness.

Although Jiumozhi discovered huge, gaping flaws in Duan Yu's study of martial arts, he was unable to overcome Duan Yu's 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', and intended to use other high-level martial arts to defeat him. But he never would have expected to be able to so easily capture him in a single attack. He was actually afraid that Duan Yu was just play-acting and had some strange trick in mind. With his one hand on Duan Yu's 'Shenfeng' acupoint, he immediately struck out with his other hand and sealed his 'Jiquan', 'Dazhui,' and 'Jingmen' acupoints. This acupoints belonged to the 'Jingmai' group, which Duan Yu also had never learned.

Jiumozhi retreated three steps. He said, "This young benefactor has memorized the method by which one might learn the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. The original manuscript has already been burned by Elder Kurong. That makes this young benefactor a living manuscript. Burning him alive as a sacrifice in front of Mr. Murong's tomb will be just as good." Spreading out his left palm, he hurriedly made five chops in a row, then seized Duan Yu and dragged him out of the doorway and away from the Muni Pavilion.

Emperor Baoding, Benyin, Benguan and the others wanted to rush forward and reclaim him, but were all sealed out by this chain of five chops which Jiumozhi made. There was no way for them to rescue him.

With a toss, Jiumozhi handed Duan Yu off to the nine escorts which stood guard outside the pavilion. He called out, "Let's go quickly!" Two of the escorts stretched their hands out simultaneously and caught Duan Yu. They did not leave the way they came in. Rather, apparently on their own initiative, they made their way out via the grove which surrounded the Muni Pavilion. Jiumozhi generated the power of his 'Blazing Flame Blade' and simply repeatedly hacked at the doorway of the Muni Pavilion.

Emperor Baoding and the others all urgently clashed the force of their Single Solitary Finger against Jiumozhi's power, but were temporarily unable to break his invisible net of sabre strikes. Jiumozhi heard the sound of hoofsteps and knew that his nine subordinates had already departed northwards with Duan Yu. He laughed long and loudly. "Burning a living manual is superior to burning a lifeless manuscript! Now that Mr. Murong has someone to accompany him in the underworld, he won't feel lonely anymore!" He made diagonal cuts with his right hand. With a 'ka la la' sound, two of the pillars of the Muni Pavilion were chopped in half. His body swayed slightly, then, as though his body were nothing more than a breath of thin smoke, he flew towards the grove as well. In an instant, his location became indiscernable.

Emperor Baoding and Bencan rushed out at the same time, only to see that Jiumozhi was already long gone. Emperor Baoding said, "Hurry! Chase him!" His gown fluttering in the wind, he had already moved many meters. Master Bencan and him were running shoulder to shoulder, picking up speed and pursuing northwards.